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THE RECONQUEST OF BURMA  
Volume I

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# THE RECONQUEST OF BURMA

VOLUME I

June 1942—June 1944

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### *ERRATA*

Page 144, line 2 from bottom: *for* Wademeyer  
*read* Wedemeyer

Page 149, line 4: *for* Geoffrey *read* Geoffry

Page 192, line 26: *for* 4th Frontier Force Rifles  
*read* 4th Frontier Force Regiment

Page 267, line 4: *for* supples *read* supplies

Page 267, line 9: *for* 51st Division *read* 15th Division



*TO ALL WHO SERVED*







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## CAMPAIGNS IN THE EASTERN THEATRE

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POST-WAR OCCUPATION FORCES: JAPAN AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA



## PREFACE

Long before the close of the Second World War, the then Government of India had decided to produce a detailed history of the operations in which the Indian armed forces were involved. Consequently a small organisation, with just one officer, was set up in the Chief of the General Staff's Branch for collecting records and collating them. By the time the war ended, this cell had expanded into the War Department Historical Section. Subsequent to the partition of India, it was agreed that the project of recording the glorious achievements of the Indian armed forces should continue as a joint venture of the two countries—India and Pakistan. The Section was thereupon reorganised under a civilian historian and was named the Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, India and Pakistan.

This Section planned the Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War to appear in about twenty volumes, besides the seven volumes relating to the medical aspects of war. These twenty volumes were divided into three series, viz., campaigns in the eastern theatre, campaigns in the western theatre, and general war administration and organisation. The volumes in the series relating to the eastern theatre deal with the campaigns in Malaya, Burma and other parts of South-East Asia. The present volume is the third of this series—the first two being *The Retreat from Burma* and *The Arakan Operations*, already published—and carries the narrative to the plans and operations leading to the reconquest of Burma. In these the Indian troops were called upon, first, to protect the north-eastern frontiers of India by blocking the progress of the Japanese forces further into that area and, later, to push them completely out of Burma in co-operation with other Allied forces.

This volume deals with the early planning for the reconquest of Burma, the bitter fighting around Imphal and Kohima for freeing the Indian soil from Japanese occupation, and the two Wingate expeditions behind the Japanese lines, and carries the story right up to June 1944. The next volume—already in the press—will narrate the story of the unprecedented operations in the hills, marshes and jungles of north and north-western Burma during the monsoon season of 1944 when the Indian and Allied troops were definitely on the offensive, and of the fighting in the plains of central and lower Burma up to the final defeat of the Japanese in August 1945.

As in earlier volumes, our object has been to present an accurate and objective account, emphasising the strategic and tactical plans



which influenced the actions of the commanders and the troops in the area. In such a study there is naturally greater stress on policies and events than on personalities. The object has been to trace the course of events and paint the picture of the campaign as a whole, irrespective of the composition of the armed forces involved. The Indian troops fought alongside their British, Chinese, African and American comrades on land, sea or air, and received full co-operation and ample support from the air forces of the United States and the United Kingdom. It is difficult to extricate the achievements of the Indian armed forces from those of their comrades from other Allied Powers, and, as such, the story depicted in this volume is that of a campaign as it progressed rather than of the Indian units in separate actions. It may be that the account of the fighting by the Indian forces has been a little more detailed at places, but that is inevitable owing to the character of the source material available to us. As historians we have kept objectivity as our guiding motive to which we have tried invariably to conform.

This volume has been seen in the typescript by Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten of Burma, the Supreme Allied Commander of the South-East Asia Command, and Field-Marshal Sir William J. Slim, the commander of the Fourteenth Army, who have been generous with their comments which have helped us considerably in taking an overall strategic view of the Burma campaigns. The value of this volume has been greatly heightened by their observations, which have been largely incorporated. We are greatly indebted to General Sir Ouvry L. Roberts, General Sir Frank Messervy, General Sir Geoffrey Scoones, Lieut.-General Sir Montagu Stopford, and Major-General Sir Douglas Gracey for their willingness to read the volume in typescript. Their comments have been of great value in remedying defects. To all of them our gratitude is immense.

I am also indebted to General K. S. Thimayya, and Lieut.-General S. P. P. Thorat, who read the volume as Members of the Advisory Committee and offered valuable suggestions. I am thankful to the Historical Section of the Government of Pakistan for their suggestions which have been incorporated. I must acknowledge my deep gratitude to Brigadier H. Latham and the Historical Section of the Cabinet in the United Kingdom for their ready assistance and suggestions.

This volume has been written by three of my colleagues in the Historical Section. The early operations in the Chin Hills and Kabaw Valley have been described by Shri P. N. Khera ; Shri K. D. Bhargava is the author of the sections dealing with Wingate's sallies into Burma ; and the chapters describing the operations in Imphal and Kohima area have been contributed by Dr. S. N. Prasad, who has also helped me in editing and co-ordinating the different sec-



tions of the book. Their earnest devotion and industry alone have made a work of this nature possible. I am also thankful to Shri T. D. Sharma, the Cartographer, for the maps and charts which he has prepared. For the views and opinions expressed in the volume, I take full responsibility. The Government of India placed all the available records at our disposal but have no connection with the views expressed herein.

In the end I must thank the Ministries of Defence of the Government of India and the Government of Pakistan for their valued assistance which has made my task lighter.

BISHESHWAR PRASAD

New Delhi  
March 1958







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## ABBREVIATIONS

Amn	Ammunition.
Arty	Artillery.
BT	British troops.
CAI	Chinese Armies in India.
CGS	Chief of General Staff.
Div	Division.
DDOS	Deputy Director Ordnance Services.
DLI	Durham Light Infantry.
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence.
DMO	Director of Military Operations.
DSO	Distinguished Service Order.
DWR	Duke of Wellington's Regiment.
FFR	Frontier Force Regiment.
FF Rif	Frontier Force Rifles.
FSD	Field Supply Depot.
GE	Garrison Engineer.
GOC	General Officer Commanding.
GPT	General Purpose Transport.
GR	Gurkha Rifles.
IGH	Indian General Hospital.
Isum	Intelligence Summary.
IT	Indian troops.
JIC(I)	Joint Intelligence Committee (India).
JPS	Joint Planning Staff.
LMGs	Light Machine-Guns
LRP	Long Range Penetration.
MMG	Medium Machine-Gun.
MS	Milestone.
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer.
OO	Operation Order.
Op Instn.	Operation Instruction.
PAD	Passive Air Defence.
PI	Platoon.
RAF	Royal Air Force.
RGR	Royal Gurkha Rifles.
R/T	Radio Telephony.
SACSEA	Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia.
SEAC	South-East Asia Command.
SEATIC	South-East Asia Translation and Interrogation Centre.
Sitrep.	Situation Report.
USAAF	United States Army Air Force.
WD	War Diary.
WIS	Weekly Intelligence Summary.
W/T	Wireless Telegraphy.
WORC R	Worcestershire Regiment.







## INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1942, the British and Indian forces were compelled to leave Burma to the Japanese and withdraw into the Indian territories. The shock of defeat was tremendous and the troops had suffered greatly, but the retreat was then considered to be merely a necessary step in the final release of Burma from the Japanese grasp. The morale of the men was high despite the reverses, and plans were being made at the General Headquarters in India to stage a come-back. The situation in the summer months was particularly grave and danger to the very security of Indian frontiers could not be altogether dismissed as imaginary. The Japanese had reached the borders of India, both in Arakan and upper Burma, and in their flush of success were expected to continue their advance into India, both overland and by sea. They had absolute control of the resources of Burma, Malaya and Indonesia and their line of communication to Japan was not in danger of disruption. The rainy season had imposed a temporary check on their further movement, but the probabilities were that they would push forward with full steam when the weather had improved. The Japanese, however, were unable to exploit the weakness of the British, and owing to the developments in the other theatres of their vastly stretched commitments in the Pacific Zone, failed to register any progress in their march against India.

This period brought the necessary respite for the Indian forces and enabled the General Headquarters to plan the eastern defences of India and even to think offensively of mounting an invasion to clear Burma of the Japanese. But the paucity of resources and the pressure of European war imposed a limit on the extent and character of such undertaking. The British by themselves were unable to find the means of expelling the Japanese from South-East Asia and had necessarily to depend on American help. The United States, however, had no interest in restoring to the British their lost dominions, but looked on any venture in these regions in the context of its ultimate reaction on the Japanese position in the Pacific area, and had greater enthusiasm in the release of China than in the return of Burma to its old masters. The United States was then engaged in the task of supplying aid to China and had no wish to divert such resources for any other purpose. The British, on their part, were keen to retrieve their honour and restore Imperial prestige and possessions in the east, and though they valued China as a major strategic base to harass Japan, did not appreciate its value



very highly, but believed that the right approach to deal with their Asian enemy was to assail him in his heel in South-East Asia ; and Burma, Malaya or Sumatra were the regions where might commence the rolling-back of Japan. This fundamental difference in the outlook of the two allies affected very intimately the whole structure of planning and the aspect of operations in Burma in the first two years after the retreat across the Chindwin.

The India Command had initiated planning for the reconquest of Burma even as early as April 1942 ; but in the first two years all the projects of offensive operation were conditioned by the paucity of resources adequate to undertake them and the fundamental divergence in the British and American approaches to the problem of the defeat of Japan. As far as Burma was concerned, whether the operations were intended to keep China in the war and use it as the base for strategic air operations against Japan or to restore Burma and Malaya to the British, the form of military action could assume only three aspects: firstly, an advance through upper Burma into its central plains and thence down to Rangoon, secondly, the conquest of the coastal plain and islands of Arakan in the south-west and using them as bases for air operations in conjunction with the northern land advance; and thirdly, an amphibious invasion of Rangoon and advance northwards to combine with the Chinese forces moving down from the Yunnan. The various plans of operations then conceived did recognise the importance of all these three modes of penetration into Burma and emphasised co-ordination of all these, but owing to the limitations of men and material, gave weight to one or the other in the initial stages of the probe. The resources in men and material in India did not justify any large scale movements in the three sectors, and the situation of war in Europe or the Middle East did not enable war equipment to be released for employment in India. The United States was busy in the Pacific and there was both division of opinion about, and lack of clear appreciation of, the problems of South-East Asia. Hence, up to the formation of the South-East Asia Command in November 1943, operations on the eastern frontier of India were in the nature of local raids and intended largely for morale purposes or to prevent any further infiltration by the Japanese. Such limited action was also the result of the division in American thinking between the Chennault and Stilwell groups, the former pinning its faith on air power to harass the Japanese in China, the latter seeking to regenerate the Chinese army for defeating the Japanese land forces and for this to reopen land communications with China by pushing through a road from India to connect with the Burma Road. The Washington Conference in May 1943 decided in favour of Chennault's mode of action, though the importance of opening the land route



to relieve pressure on air supply was not minimised. But the acceptance of either the Chennault or the Stilwell strategy amounted basically to the neglect of the British-Indian mode of major thrust in Burma itself, or of adopting a plan of defeating the Japanese in South-East Asia. Thus in 1942 and 1943, the only operations on the eastern borders of India were the slow advance in Arakan and the semi-serious local movements towards the Chindwin in the Chin hills.

In November 1943 Lord Louis Mountbatten assumed charge of the new South-East Asia Command which was set up to integrate the activities of the Chinese, American, Commonwealth and Indian forces and achieve unity of operations in South-East Asia. To this Command were assured supplies of men and equipment, and its task was to push the Japanese back from Burma and its vicinity and to co-ordinate such operations with those in the Pacific theatre where the United States and Australia were the main agents. With its establishment, the India Command divested itself of all operational responsibility and was to confine its energies mainly to raising and training of troops and to the procurement of the necessary supplies available in the country. Planning also devolved wholly on the South-East Asia Command. India, whose interests and security were so closely related to the action on her eastern borders, had thus no contact with the planning of operations, and had to lend her vast resources in men and material to the needs of integrated action on behalf of the United Nations.

The year 1943 had produced a good harvest of plans including 'Anakim' and 'Culverin'—both ambitious and modest, but there was no agreement possible at the Anglo-American conferences; and at the close of the year neither a land advance into central Burma had been decided upon nor was Churchill's pet scheme of 'the largest diversionary action' against Sumatra, Rangoon etc. accepted. However, Lord Mountbatten's Command had brought forth 'a comprehensive plan' comprising 'seven related operations', including those aimed at the capture of the Andaman Islands, an advance down the Arakan coast with Akyab as its objective, a major thrust across the Chindwin, move by the Chinese forces in the north and the employment of long-range penetration forces to disrupt Japanese communications, all to be launched in the dry months of 1944. However, the naval operations were not taken up owing to the non-availability of sufficient sea forces, and the land action also was limited in character commensurate with the capacity of the Fourteenth Army unaided by any large scale assistance from abroad. The Arakan part of the operations has been discussed in a separate volume. The present volume describes the limited offensive conducted by IV Corps on the central front which had for its objective the move



down the Kabaw Valley and through the Chin hills to Kālewa and Kalemyo on the Chindwin. In addition in 1943 and early 1944 Wingate's force had embarked on a surprise attack in the rear of the Japanese, but failed to achieve any spectacular success, though the principle of employing long-range penetration groups as a workable strategy was certainly vindicated. The odds which this group had to face in its first venture were surmounted owing to a wider use of air transport as a means of supply in the second attack, when the Japanese felt the weight of the stroke and recoiled to it. But this experiment did not obtain the results anticipated, because the basic fact that long-range penetration activity is mainly subsidiary to a major thrust elsewhere had not been fully recognised. At the beginning of the year 1944, therefore, operations in Burma were confined to a very limited advance south of Chittagong and the modest beginnings in the Chin hills. This was so because of the needs of global war in other theatres where, as in North Africa, Italy, eastern Europe or the Pacific, the Allied forces were making rapid progress against the Axis and had succeeded in making the weight of their iron felt by the other party.

The Japanese had also not been idle all this time. While the British and American Chiefs of Staff were determining the fate of one or the other plan prepared by the India or South-East Asia Command and throwing out each in turn, the Japanese had been silently preparing for a major show in two sectors for which adequate forces had been assembled. The two attacks were intended, one against Chittagong in the south, and the other against Kohima-Imphal in the north, the two bases or advance-heads for the British-Indian offensive operations in Burma. It is not known whether an amphibious landing on the eastern coast of Bengal was also contemplated to synchronise with the land thrust; but the Japanese objective was the disruption of the communications of the Fourteenth Army in Assam and Bengal and, if successful in securing a foothold on Indian soil, to create panic in the country and exploit its political situation against the British. In January, they surrounded the 7th Indian Division near Buthidaung, and though they failed to destroy that valiant Indian formation and even suffered reverses, in March they mounted their invasion of the Kohima-Imphal plain and thereby created a serious situation for the South-East Asia Command. But they had failed to recognise the fact of the growing power of the Allies and their superiority in the air even in the India-Burma theatre, owing largely to the presence of the United States Air Force in sufficient strength. The Supreme Commander not only used the air for dropping supplies to his besieged troops both in Arakan and Kohima, but also for flying in the much needed reinforcement in the shape of the 5th Indian



Division from Arakan to Kohima and thus fortifying the garrison and leaving no chinks open for the Japanese to infiltrate. The Indian troops showed their fortitude and, in the face of privations and propaganda, continued steadfast in their devotion to duty. The result was that the Japanese forces were contained at Kohima, their invasion of Imphal fizzled out and in May and June of 1944 they started releasing their grip on the besieged towns and retreating towards Ukhrul and beyond into Burma. The worst was over and, by the end of June, Lord Mountbatten was again in a position to contemplate the invasion of Upper Burma and thence a drive southwards in collaboration with the Chinese forces—a strategy which had met with favour from the Combined Chiefs of Staff.

The danger to India was past. It is difficult to be sure of the motives of Japan in this last push into India. Whether it was a token move to satisfy the compelling demands of the Indian National Army or it was a measure of counter-defence to demolish the bases of Allied offensive action against them, it is difficult to determine with certainty. One fact seems to be clear, that it was not a prelude to the full-scale invasion of India, for in the spring of 1944 the flow of war was against the Axis Powers, and the growing resources of the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom were in undisguised expression. The war in the Pacific was turning against the Japanese, the Russians were no longer on the defensive in Europe and the Chinese were also hitting back. In this combination of events, it is difficult to assume that the Japanese High Command would lightly launch on a large-scale invasion of India and attempt subjugation of this country—necessarily a long process—when their long line of communication was not safe. Therefore it seems clear—and this is borne out by some captured documents also—that the Japanese action in Kohima was a powerful tactical move to delay the mounting of invasion from Assam. But in that gamble they failed, for on the heels of the retiring Japanese troops the Fourteenth Army moved fast into Burma and thus began the collapse of Japanese occupation of South-East Asia. The story of the advance will be narrated in the second volume.

The history of the Burmese war up to June 1944 is largely a tale of the rejection of one strategic plan after another because the American and British purposes were so divergent, one seeking to utilise India for the object of keeping China in war and hitting Japan directly therefrom, the other keen to get back their old empire in South-East Asia and thereby have a major say in the affairs of the Pacific. Indian interests were nowhere considered and Burma's aspirations were not taken account of. The fighting in these early stages was mainly done by the Indian troops on the Assam front

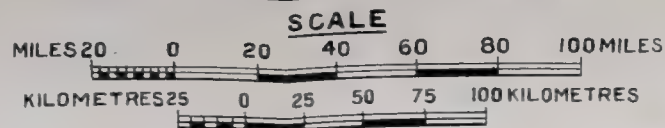


and the India Command was able to mobilise the resources of the country, even to a breaking point, to bring back to life the British Empire in the East.

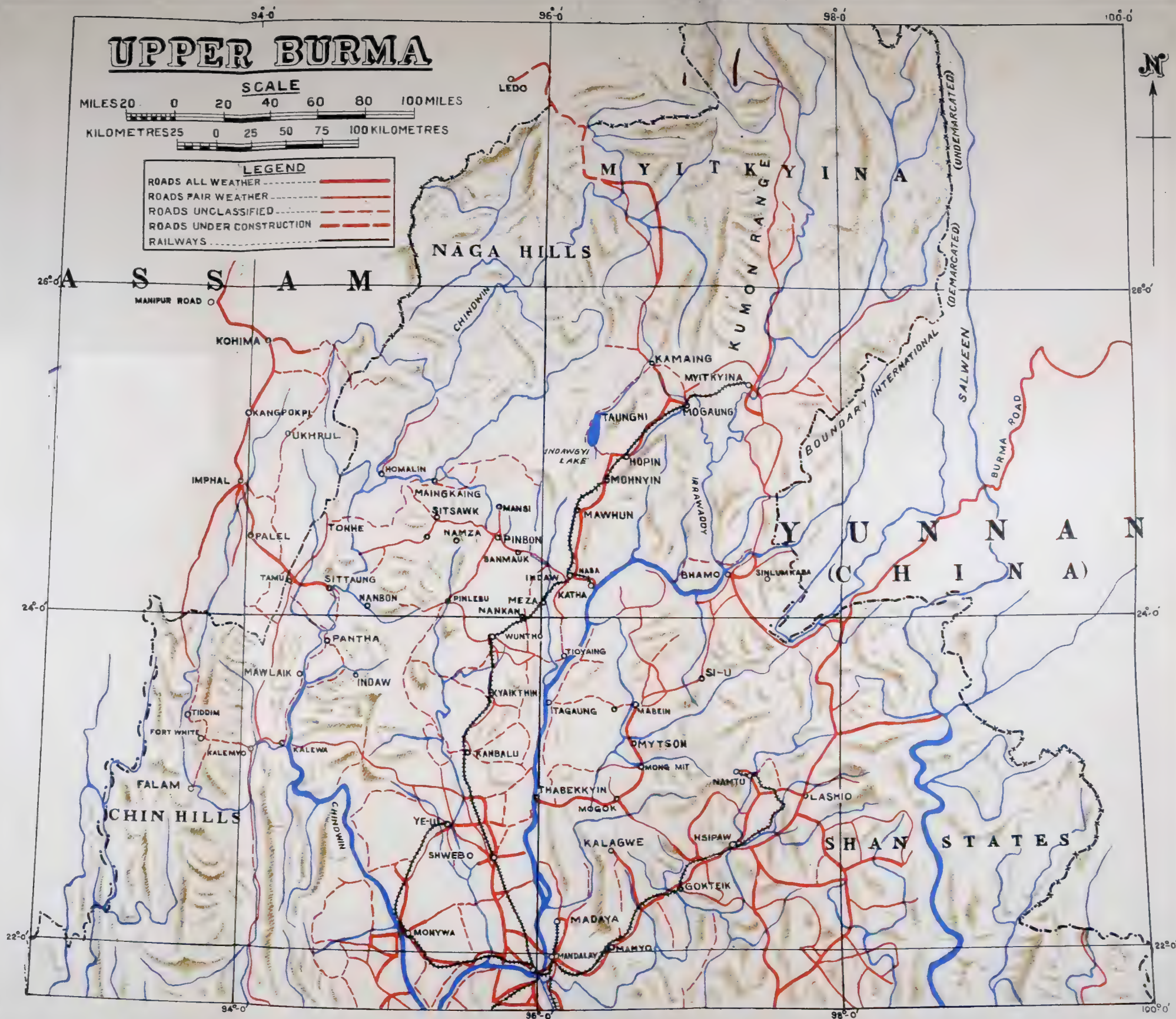
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# UPPER BURMA



LEGEND	
ROADS ALL WEATHER	—————
ROADS FAIR WEATHER	-----
ROADS UNCLASSIFIED	- - - - -
ROADS UNDER CONSTRUCTION	~~~~~
RAILWAYS	—————





## CHAPTER I

# The Background—Physical and Strategic

### THE TOPOGRAPHY OF BURMA

During the Second World War, Burma attained importance primarily as a land-bridge between India and China. Although India and China had a common frontier to the north-east of Assam, and along the borders of Kashmir, they were divided by tall mountains and wide deserts which barred access across these frontiers. Burma, on the other hand, was separated from the Chinese province of Yunnan by comparatively lower mountains, which were crossed by the Burma-China road from Lashio to Kunming. These mountains of the Shan States of Burma ran along the entire eastern frontier of the country. The northern frontier of Burma lay across the mighty mountain-knot of the eastern Himalayas with its snowy peaks and unexplored valleys. On the west, there were the Naga and Chin hills and the Arakan Yomas,<sup>1</sup> separating Burma from India. This frontier, though it presented no insuperable natural obstacles, was crossed by no railway or modern road before the war. The natural gateway to Burma lay in the south, where the excellent Rangoon harbour opened on the Bay of Bengal.

Between the sea and the mountain walls on the other three sides lay a broad and fertile plain. Its upper portion was drained by the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin rivers, the latter joining the Irrawaddy just above Pakokku, about latitude  $21^{\circ}20'$ . The lower portion of the plain was drained by the Irrawaddy and the Sittang rivers, separated by the Pegu Yomas.

The lower plain received the full force of the monsoon winds from the Bay of Bengal and from May to September had copious rainfall (above 100 inches per year), being known consequently as the Wet Zone. The hills in the border regions of the east, north and west also precipitated considerable rain. Throughout the country, wherever the rainfall was heavy, the temperature remained moderate the whole year round, though the moist heat was enervating. The Wet Zone, and particularly the lowlands of the Irrawaddy Delta, offered ideal conditions for paddy cultivation and was one of the rice bowls of South-East Asia. The upper plain enjoyed a drier climate. The maximum temperature at Shwebo

<sup>1</sup> "Yomas" in Burmese means "mountain range".



and Mandalay, for example, reached above 100°F, while the annual rainfall for the Shwebo district averaged 37 inches. At Myitkyina, due to the proximity of the hills, the annual rainfall was 75 inches, but the temperature never went beyond 98°F. The climate of the Dry Zone produced a mixed harvest of paddy, barley, gram, etc. Except for the cultivated areas along the banks of the principal rivers, the country was covered with dense tropical forests, producing excellent teak and other valuable timbers. But this advantage was counterbalanced by the lack of adequate communications and scanty population directly resulting from the hilly nature of the terrain and abundance of forests.

Conforming to the general direction of the rivers and the mountain ranges, the main arteries of communication, roads and railways, ran north and south. Apart from the road and railway running south into Tenasserim, there were roads and railways connecting Rangoon to Mandalay, and Mandalay to Bhamo in the east and Myitkyina in the north. Burma had a total of only 3,760 miles of metalled and 6,770 miles of unmetalled roads and 2,059 miles of open railways, metre-gauge, in 1938-39, while the area of the country was 261,610 square miles<sup>2</sup> and its population seventeen millions. These scanty land communications were, however, supplemented by excellent inland waterways. The great Irrawaddy was navigable for steamers up to Bhamo, 900 miles from the sea, and the Chindwin was navigable for 300 miles of its course, up to Tamanthi in latitude 25°20'.

### *The Irrawaddy Valley*

The Irrawaddy was the principal artery of communication, and the main towns like Pakokku, Mandalay, Bhamo and Myitkyina were situated along its banks. Mandalay was the second largest city in Burma with a population of over 100,000 and was the hub of communications in Upper Burma. To the south, a railway and road ran 386 miles to Rangoon. A branch line ran south-west to Myingyan on the Irrawaddy, while another line led east through the Northern Shan States to Lashio. To the west, the road and railway crossed the Irrawaddy by the new Ava Bridge, and then turned north to Shwebo, Katha and Myitkyina. From the main line between Shwebo and Wuntho a branch line took off at Kyaikthin and terminated at Yindaik on the Mu river. Wuntho itself was joined by road to Pinlebu on the Mu river. From Pinlebu the road ran west through the forest to Paungbyin on the Chindwin, though at places it was little better than a track. There was another road from Pinlebu to Indaw, which went north and then east round the

<sup>2</sup> The Statesman's *Year Book*, 1940, pp. 178-80.



Mangin range. Indaw was joined to Katha on the bank of the Irrawaddy by rail and road and several rough tracks led from Indaw to the Chindwin. From Sagaing at the western end of the Ava Bridge, a line branched to Monywa on the Chindwin river and terminated at Ye-U on the Mu river. The road, however, continued a few miles beyond Ye-U to Kin-U on the main railway line from Mandalay to Myitkyina, thus completing the circuit. There were no other roads to the west of the Irrawaddy, but to the east, Lashio was connected by road to Bhamo and Myitkyina in the north and also to Taunggyi in the south. The Irrawaddy valley was well populated, and there was a regular steamer service from Rangoon up to Bhamo.

### *The Eastern Frontier*

To the east of the Irrawaddy valley, there was the rising ground of the ruby mines district, and beyond it stood the Shan mountain ranges running north to south. They presented a high barrier in the north with an average altitude of 5000 feet, but about 25° latitude the ranges registered a descent and through them passed the Burma road from Lashio to Kunming, a distance of some 715 miles. Lashio was joined by rail and road to Mandalay, and by indifferent roads to Myitkyina *via* Bhamo in the north, and to Taunggyi in the south. From Lashio, the Burmese section of the Burma-China Road ran 115 miles up to Wanting on the frontier, and from Wanting the Chinese section continued *via* Kunming to Chungking, the then Chinese capital. The highway, built in 1938, was a dirt-track, only some 9 ft. wide, and had been carved out of solid mountain rocks by millions of Chinese labourers working without the help of modern tools. Snaking in and out of heavily wooded hills, plumbing the depths of fantastic gorges, rising precipitously to giddy heights, wriggling back and forth, up and down, it was the artery through which was pumped the life-blood of China at war, before the Japanese captured Lashio and cut the artery early in 1942. But throughout the war, the route remained important as the avenue of approach for the Chinese forces advancing from Yunnan against the Japanese in Burma.

### *The Northern Frontier*

To the north, the Irrawaddy valley was divided into two narrow valleys of the 'Nmai and the Mali rivers, which joined together to form the Irrawaddy river about latitude 25°45'.<sup>3</sup> The valley of the 'Nmai river was hemmed in by high mountains that provided no means of egress to the north or the east. The valley of the Mali

<sup>3</sup> *Burma Gazetteer, Myitkyina District, Vols. A & B.*



river, though broader, was a similar cul-de-sac. A track went up the valley from Myitkyina to Fort Hertz in the far north. Fort Hertz was inaccessible due to the high mountains on every side of it. To the west of the Mali river rose the Kumon range starting like a finger from the fist of unexplored mountains of the north and running south till it petered out on the Irrawaddy plain, north of Myitkyina. The region round Myitkyina was of singular importance in the Burma campaigns. It controlled the outlet from Hukawng valley, and was also joined by road to Bhamo and thence to Lashio. Moreover, it contained a group of vital airfields. In Japanese possession, these airfields were used as fighter bases for intercepting the Allied cargo planes flying over "the Hump" from India to China. In Allied hands, they shortened the air route from Assam to Yunnan and removed the necessity of flying over the high mountains of the Hump route.

To the west of the Kumon range lay the Hukawng valley containing the numerous head-streams of the Chindwin river. This valley, densely wooded, had a heavy rainfall and consequently boasted of some of the thickest undergrowth of shrubs, grass and vines even in Burma. It was barely accessible from Sadiya and Ledo in Assam over a broad expanse of hills, called the Patkai range, and a track led south over a low pass to Mogaung and the Irrawaddy valley. This was the terrain across which was built the famous Ledo Road, and over which marched General Stilwell with his Chinese troops.

### *The Chindwin Basin*

To the west of the upper Irrawaddy valley, the ground rose again into a tangled mass of low hills and valleys stretching for over a hundred miles to the Chindwin. The entire region was covered with forest, and was very sparsely populated. Though there was no high mountain between the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin except the Taungthonglon, the country was exceedingly broken. Steep sandstone ridges of the Tertiary period, almost perpendicular on one side and covered with magnificent tree forests on the other, rose in every direction. The rainfall was heavy in the north, averaging over 110 inches in a year, which led to the abundance of undergrowth rendering the forests around Singkaling Hkamti (on the Chindwin at latitude 26°) impregnable. Towards the south, the rainfall was moderate, totalling nearly 90 inches during the year. Hence the forests in this region were more open, it being possible even to ride through them at many places.<sup>4</sup> Further south, around Mingin, Shwebo and Monywa, the annual rainfall averaged 30 to 50 inches. These areas were within the Dry Zone of Burma and enjoyed a healthy climate.

<sup>4</sup> *Burma Gazetteer, Upper Chindwin District, Vols. A & B.*



But the population was very sparse, and the jungle covered most of the land.<sup>5</sup> Communications from east to west were meagre, only mule tracks leading from Indaw and Wuntho across the hills to Homalin and Paungbyin on the Chindwin. Also, there was a track from Shwebo to Kalewa across the valley of the Mu river, and the Chindwin itself served as a highway, with steamers running as far up as Tamanthi.

The Chindwin, on emerging from the Hukawng valley, about latitude 26°, first flowed past Singkaling Hkamti, the headquarters of a Burmese state of that name. This place was accessible from the Hukawng valley or Mogaung only over the roughest of paths, and was completely closed in from the west by the Saramati mountains. The country round about was covered with dense forest and was practically unexplored. Only the Chindwin provided easy access by country boats from Homalin and Tamanthi. The latter town, lower down the river, was the terminus of the steamer service and also the last post and telegraph station. It was also joined by a bridle path to Homalin, situated near the mouth of the Uyu river. A difficult track led west from Homalin across the river and up the precipitous mountains to Ukhrul in the Somra Tract and thence on an easier and downward gradient to Imphal. Below Homalin, Thaungdut and Paungbyin were two river stations, with a few hamlets and fertile rice fields.

### *The Frontier Region in the West*

To the west of the Chindwin there were hills and more hills. Across the lower reaches of the river from Monywa, the narrow riverain plain was backed by a broken tableland over 1000 feet high. It was crossed by the Mahudaung and Ponnyadaung ranges running north and south and enclosing the fertile little valleys of the Patalon and Taungdwin rivers. The Ponnyadaung range rose to over 4000 ft. and was bounded by the Myittha river on the west and the north.<sup>6</sup> On the north, the range continued across the Myittha with a lower elevation that separated the Chindwin valley from the Kabaw valley, and finally joined one of the mountain fingers radiating south from the Somra Tract. This range, forested like the others, was traversed by two important routes coming from the west. About latitude 23° 12', the road from Kalembo to Kalewa along the Myittha cut the range, and, about 24° 10' lay the road from Tamu to Sittaung. West of Kalembo, there lay the Chin and the Lushai hills—range after range of broken hills and deep valleys running north and south. There were no roads in that direction, although tracks led from Aijal and Lungleh in the Lushai hills of India to Haka, Falam and Tiddim

<sup>5</sup> *Burma Gazetteer, Lower Chindwin District, Vols. A & B.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, also *Pakokku and Shwebo Districts*.



in the Chin hills of Burma.<sup>7</sup> The natural line of exit from the Chin hills lay east through Kalemio and Kalewa, or north up the Manipur river to Imphal. This river flowed along a deep gorge, bordered by mountain walls with their peaks rising to 8000 feet. The eastern wall separated the Manipur river from the Kabaw valley, which, on the map, appeared as a prolongation due north of the Myittha valley. The watershed between the two valleys was indeed low and ill-defined, and a track crossed it by easy gradients to join Kalemio to Tamu, the only township in the Kabaw valley, which was exceedingly fertile, as also malarial. A few miles north of Tamu, mountains closed in upon the valley, rising to some 5000 ft. These mountains, called the Somra Tract, culminated further north in the beautiful peak of Saramati, 12,557 feet high, and were known as the Naga hills on their western slopes.<sup>8</sup>

### *Manipur Valley*

From Tamu the road led west, across the Indian frontier, over a low range of hills *via* Palel to the Manipur valley beyond. Shut in on all sides by hills the Manipur valley was 30 miles long and 20 miles broad. It was situated at an elevation of 2600 feet and had an annual rainfall of 70 inches.<sup>9</sup> The valley was drained by four or five rivers that rose as mountain streams in the Naga hills to the north and flowed out together as the Manipur river from the southern end of the valley. They carried off also the overflow of the Loktak lake situated in the middle of the valley and covering an area of about 35 square miles. Imphal, the capital of Manipur State, was an important hub of communications. Apart from the Tamu road entering from the east and the Tiddim road coming from the south, a good metalled road led north-west over the Naga hills to Kohima. This road, running beyond Kohima to the railhead at Dimapur, was the main line of communications of the Allied armies facing the Japanese on this front. If this road were cut, there remained only the indifferent tracks from Imphal due west over the hills to Silchar.

It needs hardly be added that the entire area surveyed above, except for a narrow ribbon along the river valleys, was a howling wilderness of rocks and trees, with a few hamlets scattered here and there in the forest. Interlacing vines and trailers made the line of trees into a solid wall. The undergrowth was often choked with a profusion of orchids, ferns and wild roses. Green lichen hung from the branches. Wild beasts, including such dangerous animals as

<sup>7</sup> Assam District Gazetteers, Vol. X and supplement.

<sup>8</sup> Burma Gazetteer, Upper Chindwin District.

<sup>9</sup> Gazetteer of Manipur, compiled by Capt. E. W. Dunn, (Calcutta, 1886). Gazetteer of Manipur prepared under the direction of Major Douglas Macneill by Lieuts. I. West & C. B. Little (Calcutta 1884). Assam District Gazetteers; Vol. IX.



elephants, rhinoceroses, tigers, panthers and buffaloes, reigned supreme in these sylvan fastnesses, which were the happy hunting grounds of tribes only recently weaned away from their head-hunting proclivities. Tracks were few and far between, and to the dangers of enemy ambush were added the perils of snakes and malaria. This was the sombre arena in which the opposing Japanese and Allied soldiers fought out their grim battles.

#### THE STRATEGIC BACKGROUND

##### *The China Incident*

The Japanese invasion of Burma in 1941-42 developed out of the "China Incident", a heartless euphemism for the undeclared Sino-Japanese war. It started in the night of 7-8 July, 1937, when Chinese troops opened fire on Japanese soldiers near Peking. At first a peaceful solution of the incident appeared probable, but further fighting broke out on 12 July and considerable Japanese troops were poured into China for punitive action. Fighting soon became general, though no war was declared by either party. During the first year of fighting, Japanese troops invaded and occupied large areas of Northern China, including Shanghai, Tientsin, Peking and Nanking. The Chinese Government removed itself to Hankow and General Chiang Kai-shek declared that "China will continue to fight until she has driven the invader out."<sup>10</sup> Support in arms and supplies was available to him from the United Kingdom and the United States.

The Japanese generals soon realised that it was impracticable to knock out China by direct invasion or to occupy the whole of that country, and that the only hope lay in stopping the flow of arms and supplies into China and thus gradually rendering her vast hordes incapable of further resistance. The Chinese also appreciated their weakness before the formidable Japanese troops in the field and decided on a long war of attrition, for which it was necessary to keep lines of communication open along which help reached their forces. The Sino-Japanese war thereupon became a struggle for communications, and the Japanese strategy aimed primarily at cutting all channels through which outside aid might reach the Chinese armies. In the second and subsequent years of the struggle, therefore, except for the capture of the second Chinese capital of Hankow in October 1938, the Japanese occupied themselves mainly in tightening up their blockade of the Chinese coast and plugging the remaining channels of entry. Canton was occupied in October 1938, which stopped the shipments of arms through Hong

<sup>10</sup> Keesing's *Archives*, July 8, 1939, p. 3637A.



Kong. In February 1939, the island of Hainan was invaded; the International Concession off Amoy was occupied in May 1939 and the port of Swatow taken in June 1939. As a result of these operations, it became virtually impossible for the Chinese defenders to obtain any supplies through their long sea-board. From 1939, therefore, imports reached China only through the "backdoors". Three arteries of land communication with the outside world were developed, *viz.*, the 1500 miles long caravan route from Lanchow in the north-west to Asiatic Russia, the road and railway from Yunnan into French Indo-China in the south, and the road from Burma to Kunming and Chungking in the south-west. Japanese strategy in South-East Asia was henceforth intimately concerned with the blocking of these lines of communication.

### *War in the West*

While Japan was extending her control along the Chinese sea-board, Europe was plunged into war which broke out on 3 September 1939, when the German demand for the Polish Corridor was refused. In spite of their open friendship for Germany and the anti-Comintern Pact, Italy and Japan remained temporarily neutral. However, the war in Europe placed a heavy burden on the resources of the United Kingdom, France and their allies. All the British resources and arms production were taken up by it, so that the forces in India, Burma and Malaya remained dangerously ill-equipped. Then, in the spring and summer of 1940, disaster overtook the Allies. Denmark and Norway were invaded by the Nazis in April, and the terrible Blitzkrieg struck Holland, Belgium and France on 10 May. The Dutch capitulated after five days, the Belgian army surrendered after eighteen days, and France was knocked out of the war by 21 June 1940. In the meantime, Italy had also jumped into the arena, and North Africa had become a theatre of active operations.

As a result of these catastrophic events, the Anglo-French position in the Far East was critically weakened. Soon after the German break-through in France, in July 1940, the Japanese put pressure on the Allies for the closure of the French Indo-China border with China and of the Burma Road. Neither the British nor the French Government felt itself in a position to refuse these demands and the Indo-China border was closed indefinitely, while the Burma Road was closed for three months. Both the Chinese and the United States governments protested vigorously against these actions, but without avail. General Chiang Kai-shek was left only with the long and difficult supply line from Asiatic Russia. Japan was very near her goal then, but the position soon changed again. After the period of three months, the British Government felt strong enough to re-open the Burma Road, and supplies poured in to the hard-pressed



Chinese armies. During 1941, between 3500 to 4500 trucks operated on the Burma Road, and work was begun on a railway line also to connect Burma with China.

### *Japan attacks*

Things were in fact rapidly coming to a head in East Asia. The Japanese felt that they were definitely bogged down in China. They had either to "lose face" and withdraw from China, or choose the alternative of closing the Chinese supply line to Burma by force. Withdrawal from China involved the scuttling of the entire "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere", hence they chose the other alternative, which brought them into conflict with the United States and the United Kingdom, who could not remain silent spectators of Japanese expansion in China and the East Indies. On 21 July 1941, Vichy France agreed to a temporary occupation of Indo-China by Japan. Thereupon the American, British and Netherlands Governments announced the freezing of all Japanese assets and credits in their countries, and the United Kingdom also denounced the commercial treaties of 1934 and 1937. "This was a declaration of economic war",<sup>11</sup> and the die was cast. Japan opened the war in characteristic style on 7 December 1941, and within a few months overran the Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and Burma. These territories were conquered with two objects in view. Firstly, Japan required the tin of Malaya, the rubber of Sumatra and the petroleum of Borneo and Burma to be able to fight a long war. And, secondly, these countries and the Japanese-held islands of the Pacific were links in a protective chain stretched round the Japanese home-lands. By defending these outposts with their usual desperate valour, the Japanese hoped "to barter space for time", and so wear out the attacking Allied forces that a negotiated peace might result.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Apex of the War—1941 to 1943*

By the time the Japanese whirlwind campaign had begun in Asia, Germany had conquered more territory in Europe. The whole of the Balkans and South-East Europe were brought under Nazi hegemony in the spring of 1941, either through peaceful penetration, as in Rumania and Hungary, or by armed attack, as in Yugoslavia and Greece. Soviet Russia was attacked on 22 June 1941. The German Panzers made spectacular advance during the summer and the autumn, captured Kiev, Smolensk, Odessa, Rostov and Kharkov, but failed in their assault on Moscow. After a difficult winter, the German armies surged forward again in the spring

<sup>11</sup> Fuller, Major-General J.F.C.: *The Second World War*, p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 129 ff.



of 1942, aiming to cut off the Caucasian oilfields from the Russian armies defending Moscow. They reached Stalingrad on the Volga, took Krasnodar and Maikop and thrust deep into the Caucasus before they were finally stopped and hurled back.

In fighting these tremendous battles, Russia had received considerable aid from the United Kingdom and the United States, then at war with Germany and Italy.<sup>13</sup> Iraq, Syria and Iran had been occupied by British and Indian forces between May and August 1941, and Iran was used as the backdoor for pouring supplies into Russia. The fighting in North Africa was also in full swing. While Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland were conquered by the Indo-British forces by the middle of 1941, the thrust and counter-thrust in Libya had still continued. The redoubtable General Rommel had inflicted severe and repeated losses on the British and Indian forces arrayed against him and had kept up the front as a festering sore that grievously bled the British Empire.

Allied resources, vast and growing as they were, were not equal to the task of defeating Germany and Japan simultaneously on all the far-flung battle-fronts of the global war. In the "Arcadia" Conference held in Washington in December 1941—January 1942, therefore, the Allied leaders decided to concentrate first against Germany and to deploy their forces primarily in the Atlantic and European regions. While Germany was being crushed, against Japan a strategic defensive was to be maintained, emphasising the need to "safeguard vital interests and deny Japan access to needed raw materials."<sup>14</sup> The decision was eminently sound, for Great Britain and Russia were already locked in mortal combat against Germany, and the knocking out of the German war machine alone could break the Axis will to fight. Due to these factors, the United Kingdom and Soviet Russia were bound to attend to Germany first, and the leaders of the United States also agreed to do the same. Forces in India were, however, divided between the Atlantic and Pacific Zones and were, at the same time, led to direct their major attention to counter-acting Japanese aggression on the eastern frontiers of India and to the eventual release of Burma from Japanese occupation, for which purpose operations were initiated in the second half of 1942. These operations, and the plans on which they were based, are described in the chapters that follow.

<sup>13</sup> From 11 December 1941. Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Chronology of the Second World War*, (OUP 1947).

<sup>14</sup> The Army Air Forces in World War II, Vol. I, *Plans and Early Operations* (University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 238.



## CHAPTER II

# Counter-offensive Plans

March 1942 to December 1943

Soon after the entry of Japanese troops into Burma, the military situation there had worsened for the defending British, Indian and Chinese forces. After the fall of Pegu, the evacuation of Rangoon and the loss of lower Burma had become inevitable. Rangoon was evacuated in the beginning of March 1942 and then began a series of withdrawals northwards closely followed up by the Japanese forces. Though disastrous, the Allied retreat was not disorderly and the forces remained intact. The Allied troops distinguished themselves in rearguard actions but were defeated because of the superior training of the Japanese in jungle warfare and their strategy of infiltration and envelopment.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of March, however, the situation had greatly deteriorated, so much so that a serious danger to the security of India itself was apprehended. In the Director of Military Operations appreciation of 28 March 1942, the situation as it might develop in the next six months was analysed, and the measures necessary to restore the position were considered. Rangoon had fallen, and the Japanese were in occupation of the general line Lashio-Shwebo-Paletwa. The Allied forces were withdrawing and were being maintained by air. The Chinese were still in the war, though with a low morale, and fighting reluctantly. The Allies had no mechanical transport, but, for their maintenance, had a paltry force of 125 transport aircraft.

As against this woeful tale of the Allies, the Japanese had the advantages of controlling the Burma railways and inland water transport, of the use of aerodromes in Burma and Thailand, and of the full control of the Bay of Bengal and sea communications with Rangoon. While retreating, the Allied troops had carried out extensive demolitions of bridges, oilfields etc. but everything was being quickly repaired and put to use by the Japanese.

Taking into consideration all the factors, *viz.* strength of forces, weather, topography and the temper of the people, the Director of Military Operations "appreciated" in March that the Japanese might adopt any one of the following courses of action by September 1942.

<sup>1</sup> For details see *Official History of the Indian Armed Force in World War II, The Retreat from Burma*, Historical Section, India and Pakistan, 1952.



- Course I ... To leave a sufficient force to cover their western flank, and to press north-eastwards along the China Road with the object of finishing off Chinese resistance.
- Course II ... The reverse of Course I, namely to leave forces to cover their eastern flank and to move against Assam and Eastern Bengal.
- Course III ... To concentrate on movements along the west coast of Burma and to continue this movement into Bengal and along the Meghna and Padma rivers, supplementing this with a diversion by sea against the east coast of the Bay of Bengal.<sup>2</sup>

The Director of Military Operations did not consider the first two courses as likely. The last course might offer "better prospects and faster results than any movement through Assam".<sup>3</sup> This course had the advantage that it would permit of gradual extension in northern Burma while providing quicker results. By this means Assam would be cut off by a move up the Meghna and Padma rivers and northwards along the Brahmaputra. Owing to the weakness of India on the sea and in the air, a landing operation on the east coast of India was not unexpected and the east Bengal coast was also vulnerable. To supplement the seaborne action, a Japanese land attack through Arakan might also be likely.

To counteract the impending danger, the Director of Military Operations outlined three courses of action for India, which envisaged offensive operations with the object of destroying the Japanese forces in Burma. A counter-offensive is an essential element of defence, and it was on that principle that, at the moment, the plans of operations in India were based. Hence the strategy which might promise appreciable results would be that of adopting an offensive to destroy the hostile forces as far away as possible, but at the same time to be ready to meet any local threat. Such strategy would enable even a comparatively weak defence to earn higher dividends. On this assumption, therefore, certain courses were suggested in this appreciation, with the object of launching an attack against Burma, either by way of Assam or down the Arakan coast. The alternative courses were:

- (i) To attack from Assam with a corps of two divisions, with the object of recapturing Mandalay and Lashio and opening the supply route to China.
- (ii) To combine with (i) above, a movement down the west coast of Burma from Chittagong.

<sup>2</sup> "Appreciation by DMO on 28-3-42 of the situation in Burma as it may be by September 1942, and the measures necessary to restore the position," paras 22-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, para 25.



- (iii) To start an attack by two divisions against northern Burma as in (i), and when the Japanese start sending reinforcements northwards, to put in attacks against their main lines of communication simultaneously from the west and the east. The attack from the west would be in the form, firstly, of a division landed on a broad front from Akyab to Gwa on the west coast to cause dispersion of Japanese air forces and, secondly, of main landings opposite An and Taungup, and directed ultimately against Magwe and Prome to cut the Irrawaddy line of communication. This would involve capture of Akyab by parachutists and surprise landings near Ramree Islands etc. by a combined operation. From the east, the attack would be organised by means of an irregular force operating against the railway at Pyawbwe and joining up with the main force. This operation, if successful, would have involved the destruction of Japanese forces in the north and opened the way for operations in the south.

The last course was considered to be fruitful of effective results. But air superiority was essential for its execution. The most feasible course was to strike in the north, combined with an attack on the line of communication in the rear. The Japanese were supposed to entertain the plan of moving northwards, up the west coast of Burma, and combining it with a seaborne operation against Bengal. To prevent this, and to recapture Burma, the course as above was suggested for which plans of operation had to be prepared.

The paper met with the approbation of General Wavell who considered it a valuable basis for planning a counter-offensive in Burma, if all went well there till the autumn. He was conscious of the difficulty of holding Burma, yet he wanted "someone with a mind not wedded to orthodoxy to plan a reconquest of Burma or operations against Japanese line of communication as they advance towards India".<sup>4</sup> This appreciation served as the basis for future planning of counter-offensive in Burma though immediately the turn of events made any action on those lines impossible.

Burma was lost by the end of May 1942 but the Allies were able to extricate a large part of their forces to safety behind the frontiers of India. The 17th Indian Division had reached Kalewa before 15 May 1942, after crossing the flooded Chindwin, despite frequent bombing and machine-gunning from the air, and was able to make for the border of Assam and Manipur, though the last part of the retreat was effected after the monsoon had broken out in full fury on the 12th. By 28 May, practically all the troops of General

<sup>4</sup> Note from General Wavell to CGS dated 20.3.1942, File No. 12049, p. 3.



Alexander's Burma Army had crossed the Indian border, and were out of Japanese reach.<sup>5</sup> Some Chinese forces had also retired into Yunnan, which was subjected to Japanese attack. But a large part of these forces had moved into India, where General Stilwell also arrived after an adventurous journey through Central Burma to Assam. The Allied forces had, in his words, taken "a hell of a beating" and had retired to India leaving almost the whole of Burma to the Japanese, thus forsaking the initiative to the latter to strike at their will, either against China or India.

The situation was so grave that General Wavell thought that even "India itself and Ceylon lay under imminent threat of invasion", while "the forces available for defence were dangerously weak".<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the Japanese had at the moment adequate forces to follow up their successes in Burma, by launching an invasion of India simultaneously by land, through Assam or Eastern Bengal, and by seaborne landing operations on the eastern coast of India. Their air force was also well-poised with their well-spread aerodromes in Burma, to inflict continuous and heavy raids on Calcutta and the industrial area in the eastern regions. He had therefore been stressing, since March, the need to strengthen the North-Eastern defences of India. The Chiefs of Staff had, however, decided to give priority to the defence of Ceylon over that of Calcutta or north-east India. But, fortunately for the Indian defences, initially the Japanese attention was directed against Yunnan, through which passed the lifeline of China, the so-called Burma Road. This diversion, along with the stiff resistance offered by the Indian forces in their retreat towards India, delayed the follow-up and then the monsoon set in, when any offensive action by the Japanese in the unexplored, jungly regions on the eastern frontier of India, was well-nigh impossible. This gave a respite to the Indian forces and enabled the India Command to organise the defences, secure reinforcements, strengthen supplies, and be prepared not only for effective defence of the frontiers but also to contemplate counter-offensive moves for the recapture of Burma. The most dangerous hour of India passed off, never to return in its original intensity.

The coming of the monsoon and the adoption of active counter-offensive by the United States forces in the Pacific, as well as the Japanese diversion against Chinese forces in Yunnan, primarily with the intention of liquidating that commitment, delayed the invasion of India. It is also surmised that Japan might have been watching the trend of the political movement in India and, not being certain

<sup>5</sup> At different times during the last days of the retreat, men of the 1st Burma Division had been allowed to go to their homes, and were told to be ready to join the resistance movement against Japanese occupation at the opportune time.

<sup>6</sup> Field-Marshal Sir A. P. Wavell's Despatch on "Operation in Eastern Theatre, based on India, from March 1942 to December 31, 1942", p. 1, para 2.



of the reaction of the people and the Indian National Congress, might have put off the attack which she was then in a position to launch. With the end of the monsoon, however, some reinforcements had arrived in India, the Pacific situation had improved, and the Indian internal situation, too, had lost its sharpness; hence the defence was in a position to turn its gaze to plan a counter-offensive.

*Military Situation on the Eastern Frontier in the Summer of 1942*

In the summer of 1942, the situation of the Eastern Army, which was responsible for the defence of north-east India, was as follows:—

“IV Corps (Lieut-General N.M.S. Irwin) was responsible for the defence of Assam. The Burma Army (17th Indian Division and 1st Burma Division) passed under his command;’ apart from them he had only one brigade, the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division, which had only recently moved into Manipur State and was astride the Pail-Tamu road; and one battalion of the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade.

“XV Corps (Lieut-General Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse) was responsible for the defence of Bengal against seaborne invasion or an advance up the Arakan coast. It comprised the 14th and 26th Indian Divisions, both incomplete.

“70th British Division (less one Brigade Group), and the 50th Armoured Brigade were in Ranchi in Army Reserve with the role of meeting any seaborne expedition on the Orissa Coast”.

There were certain auxiliary forces, and a force of local levies was raised from amongst the hillmen of the Lushai, Chin and Naga hills, known as “V” force. Its role was to collect information and harry the Japanese lines of communication. Another force was also organised to man river boats to patrol the waterways intersecting Bengal. It was known as the Sundarbans Flotilla. The army in the north-east was neither fully equipped nor trained for the job and no division was complete. By the end of June, however, two British divisions (5th and 2nd) were arriving, anti-aircraft and other units had reached India, and the remnants of the Burma Army were re-forming. Two Indian armoured divisions were also being completed as some equipment had been received. Moreover, the Chinese forces had arrived in India and additional troops were being flown to Ramgarh, where the Chinese Army was re-forming, re-equipping and receiving training for the counter-offensive. The air force was also being strengthened. In March 1942 its strength was negligible. But, by the end of the year, 29 squadrons were on operational role and another 20 were forming, in addition to the two squadrons of transport aircraft and one Photo Reconnaissance Unit.

’ There was practically nothing left of the 1st Burma Division, but the 17th Indian Division, though depleted and not yet re-equipped, was pressed into service.



From about 30 to 40 airfields in March, 150 airfields were suitable for operation by the end of the monsoon season and others were under construction.

The transportation problem was another handicap to effective defence or counter-offensive. There was a remarkable lack of communications from the rest of India into Eastern Bengal; and Assam was practically cut off by the unbridged Brahmaputra. There was only one single-track railway in Assam which was connected with a ferry across the Brahmaputra. Roads were also practically non-existent. River transport too had been depleted to meet the demands from Iraq. In Bengal also the situation was no better. To the east, Chittagong was connected by a single-track metre-gauge railway. Early measures were, however, taken to improve matters. A road from Assam to Burma through Imphal-Kalewa was under construction. The Ledo Road to connect with the China-Burma Road was also being pushed ahead. Manipur Road station was developed as an adequate railhead. Moreover, communications in Assam were also being developed. A new railhead and advanced base was made at Ledo, an additional river port was made on the Brahmaputra north of Jorhat, and many additional crossing places were prepared on the railway, and the control system was improved. Nevertheless, the position was extremely disappointing, and it deteriorated further owing to a high incidence of malaria in Assam, floods in Bihar and disturbed internal conditions in northern India. These factors prevailed till the end of the monsoon and necessarily delayed preparations for a counter-offensive; but, with the advent of winter, schemes of counter-offensive began to be considered again.

Planning had in fact been taken up by the Chiefs of Staff in England and by the India Command even while the withdrawal from Burma was going on. The Director of Military Operations appreciation of 28 March has already been mentioned. On 16 April, General Wavell had issued definite instructions to the Joint Planning Staff to begin "consideration of an offensive to re-occupy Burma." It was not intended for immediate execution, but was meant to give an idea of the possible commitments involved for planning ahead to proceed. An estimate of the troops required, their maintenance, training, number of airfields, aircraft etc. was to be made. General Wavell had originally intended to undertake a limited offensive into Upper Burma directed towards Kalewa-Katha-Myitkyina line in October to be followed by a push from Chittagong into the Arakan, and a seaborne expedition against Lower Burma. But conditions in India and the non-availability of essential supplies in time led him to postpone the offensive to March 1943, which did not materialise even then. Planning however continued throughout the summer and autumn of 1942, and revealed the difficulties of the problem.



The first important study of the problem of recapture of Burma was made by the Joint Planning Staff in their Paper No. 15, dated 11 May 1942. It was a comprehensive analysis of the factors involved and the principles on which operations might proceed. In this study were included three main types of operations or a combination of them: overland from north-east India, seaborne expedition and operations along the Arakan coast. The difficulties involved in each one of them and the forces and maintenance arrangements required were also examined. Taking all these aspects into consideration, the Planning Staff came to the conclusion that "a large scale offensive against Burma cannot be staged for sometime",<sup>8</sup> for it "is dependent on many factors beyond the control of the India Command." It was rightly argued that "it depends on strategic developments in the other war theatres, and their effect on the combined plans of the Allied Powers. The reconquest of Burma may require a considerable effort and make heavy demands on our naval, army and air resources. But this is only one of the ways by which we can strike back at the Japanese, and it may not be the most economical method of doing so".<sup>10</sup> Before any effective planning proceeded, it was essential to know the object of the operation, whether it was "to be the reoccupation of Upper Burma to re-establish the supply routes to China, or whether India is to be a base for a major sea-expedition by Allied forces, or whether India's role is merely to be ancillary to other major operations conducted from bases further east".<sup>11</sup> These questions could be answered only by the Chiefs of Staff in London and Washington, who alone had the full picture and could determine priorities and fix the dates. Nevertheless in this paper broad aspects of the problem were studied in order to outline the possible scope of the operations and the forces and types of equipment required.

The basic principles governing any offensive operations from India were laid down as: (i) the restoration of control in the Indian Ocean, (ii) sufficient strength in shore-based and carrier-borne aircraft for protecting the fleet and for establishing air superiority, (iii) the capture of Rangoon as a preliminary to the occupation of the whole of Burma, and (iv) the capture of the Andamans, and the aerodromes on the Arakan coast as an essential preliminary.<sup>12</sup>

The paper then examined the possibilities of the three types of operations, specified earlier. Taking overland operations from Assam first, it was held that owing to the limited capacity of the lines

<sup>8</sup> Joint Planning Staff (India Command) Paper No. 15, dated 11 May 1942, entitled, "Offensive Operations into Burma", p. 1, para 2, File 12012.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, page 6, para 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, page 6, para 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, page 7.



of communication into Upper Burma, the inconvenient situation of the aerodromes for providing air support, and the strength of the Japanese forces well provided with a chain of good aerodromes, only a small force could advance into Upper Burma, with scanty chances of success, unless the Japanese defence had been sufficiently weakened by events elsewhere. The only object of such an operation would be to capture aerodromes.

Next were discussed the operations involving a seaborne expedition. The Burma coastline had three portions, the Irrawaddy Delta, the Arakan coast, and the Tennasserim coast. In the Delta, Rangoon and Moulmein were important bases about which the Japanese would be most sensitive. Hence strategic advantages would result by the recapture of Rangoon. The Arakan coast was important, for without it air superiority over the Irrawaddy Delta would not be established. Tennasserim coast would not admit of the deployment of large forces, though for diversional purposes its value was undoubted, as it was possible by a raid on the Victoria Point to interrupt railway communication, or threaten Bangkok by a landing near Tavoy. But naval and air superiority was essential for any type of seaborne expedition and, for that, early capture of aerodromes on the Arakan coast and the capture of the Andaman Islands were deemed to be necessary preludes. The primary objective was however to be confined initially to the capture of aerodromes on the coast-line. The third type of operations, i.e. along the coast, was designed for a "thrust southward, capturing existing aerodromes and building additional ones where possible. This could be either a preliminary operation to assist in gaining initial air superiority, or part of the main offensive plan."<sup>13</sup>

Estimating the strength of the forces required, the presumption was that the Japanese would hold Burma in strength, even if they had no intention of pushing further west, and would maintain a garrison of five to seven divisions with 500 aircraft. In the circumstances, the Allies could not employ a smaller force. Two to three divisions only would be maintained for an overland advance, and two divisions might be usefully employed on the Arakan coast. But without the capture of Rangoon, for which a seaborne expedition was essential, the other two operations would not make any serious impression. Hence a force of eight divisions and 500 aircraft was required "unless the Japanese garrison of Burma can be reduced by diversions elsewhere."<sup>14</sup>

The paper outlined two possible plans which provided reasonable chances of success, but their adoption would depend on the situation at the time. The first related to the recapture of Burma,

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, page 5, para 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, page 5, para 26.



as a whole. This would involve "preliminary operations to capture and develop aerodromes on the Arakan coast, and to seize the Andamans, followed by the despatch of a seaborne expedition to capture Rangoon. A diversion from north-east India would be valuable." A total force of eight divisions was required. The second plan was based on the recapture of Upper Burma only, assisted by a diversion on the Arakan coast. For this a total force of six divisions was required, two for initial advance, two for consolidation, one for diversion and one as reserve.

This paper was of a general nature, but it focussed the attention on the object which should determine the character of the plan of operations. If the object was to restore the supply line to China, then the operations would be of a limited nature and sea supremacy in Burmese waters would not be essential. If, on the other hand, a more comprehensive object, that of the reoccupation of Burma and the strategic defeat of Japan, were envisaged, then the course would necessarily be "to establish air bases in the Andamans and at Akyab and perhaps Ramree Islands. After that it might be more promising to go for Moulmein and the landing grounds down the Tenasserim coast to Tavoy. From there our air forces could operate against Bangkok and the air bases north of it, and against enemy shipping in the Gulf of Siam. Land forces operating east from Moulmein would threaten the railway line running north from Bangkok."<sup>15</sup> The Director of Military Operations considered this bold adventure "more promising than a systematic recapture of Burma, where we may expect the population to be hostile and where probably at least two divisions will be necessary to keep order in a country which is really only a Japanese outpost".<sup>16</sup> A plan like that required immense resources but these were not available at the moment. This plan, however, denoted the lines on which the subsequent planning might proceed.

Meanwhile the Chiefs of Staff in England had also been considering possibilities of operations for the recapture of Burma. They were then, in May 1942, thinking in terms of reopening communications with China for which capture of Rangoon was essential.<sup>17</sup> To achieve that object two simultaneous operations were contemplated: one, advance across the India-Burma frontier, and the other down the coast from Chittagong, from aerodrome to aerodrome, with a view to establishing fighter aircraft in the Gwa or Bassein area. The recapture of Andamans as a desirable preliminary was also thought of. But they realised the limitations in executing these operations

<sup>15</sup> Note dated 12 May 1942 by D.M.O. on Joint Planning Staff (JPS) Paper No. 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Chiefs of Staff telegram of 9 May 1942.



which were not practicable unless it were possible to secure control over the Bay of Bengal, air superiority over southern Burma and adequate number of landing crafts. To commence these operations in autumn would be feasible only if there was some deterioration in Japanese strength and mobility. The India Command was in general agreement with the lines adumbrated by the Chiefs of Staff, and their estimate of the forces required to carry out the respective operations was eight divisions plus armoured component.

The Commander-in-Chief also outlined the nature of the planning pursued in India in his telegram of 15 May 1942. Its main lines coincided with the Joint Planning Staff Paper No. 15 of 11 May 1942. He mentioned that planning had under consideration two operations:—

- (a) for the recapture of the whole of Burma, and
- (b) limited operations to secure Upper Burma, north of Mandalay.

The India Command decided initially for a "limited offensive into Upper Burma with the object of re-establishing our forces in the Chindwin and Irrawaddy valleys, north of Mandalay, on the line Kalewa-Katha-Myitkyina with the possibility of extending it towards Bhamo, Shwebo and the Chinese frontier."<sup>18</sup> An offensive of this nature was to be planned to start on 1 October. On this basis, the Chief of Staff (India) desired a plan to be prepared by the Joint Planning Staff.<sup>19</sup> The paper produced by the latter on 1 June 1942 was based on extreme caution and failed to meet with the approval of General Wavell, who found it "disappointing" and as magnifying "our own difficulties almost exclusively and not those of the enemy", "far more defensive than offensive in spirit".<sup>20</sup> The Joint Planning Staff Paper had, however, the merit of appreciating the weaknesses in maintenance and air resources and precisely assessing the requirements of training and information and the difficulties arising from terrain and weather. Its cautious conclusion, therefore, was that the chances of a rapid advance were small, and that the objectives would have to be reached gradually. To achieve this, the troops would have to be lightly equipped and maintained on a much lower scale than previously.

But as the Imphal-Kalewa and Ledo roads were not expected to be usable fully before March 1943, an outline plan in three phases, to be in full operation in March 1943, was prepared. In the first phase (until mid-September), active patrolling was to be carried out in the area bounded on the west by the line of the road Tamu-

<sup>18</sup> JPS Paper No. 18 "Offensive into Burma", 1 June 1942 (Joint Planning Staff) India Command, page 1, para 1.

<sup>19</sup> "Chiefs of Staff Committee Paper No. 42, S. 5", dated 16 May 1942 referred to in JPS Paper No. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Note by General Wavell dated 4 June 1942, File No. 12015.



Kalewa and on the east by the river Chindwin. The second phase from mid-September to end of February, was to be concerned with the complete capture and consolidation of the area comprising the rectangle Homalin-Kalewa-Kalemyo-Tamu. The last phase beginning in March, would involve advance on Shwebo and Katha. Along with this move was to synchronise an advance southwards from Ledo of a brigade group strength. The force required for the main operation was to be a maximum of three divisions and two armoured brigades. Air action was also contemplated. For this purpose a force of 29 squadrons would be available on 1 October 1942, and would suffice for the object.

While denouncing the Joint Planning Staff Plan of 1 June 1942, General Wavell had assessed his advantages as local air superiority, better lines of communication and manoeuvrability, with concealment behind the mountain barrier, while the Japanese lines of communication running parallel to the front were vulnerable. Hence he desired the plans to take full advantage of these favourable factors. The object of the offensive plans was to get into touch with the Chinese and raise the morale in India. These operations he wanted to be prepared for October, if possible, and a directive to be issued to the Eastern Army accordingly.

The War Cabinet in England, too, were not happy with halting half-measures, "minor operations, very nice and useful nibbling". What they desired was "the capture of Rangoon and Moulmein and thereafter striking at Bangkok. This would be seizing the initiative and making the enemy conform, instead of being, through no fault of your own, like clay in the hands of the potter. It would be war on a large scale, and the movement of reserves from Britain would be regulated accordingly."<sup>21</sup> But it was at the same time realised that no such operations would be practicable unless the situation in the Caucasus and Middle East regions improved and there was no setback there. Japanese losses in the Pacific and their diversion towards Manchuria and Siberia affected their strength in the south-eastern theatre. The Cabinet assured the Commander-in-Chief of the "support with resolution" of the fleet and the air force, and desired him to state his "stand in relation to these ideas".

This communication seems to have whipped up the optimism of General Wavell. In his reply<sup>22</sup> he sketched the improvement in the situation of India's defence and mentioned the receipt of reinforcement as well as some improvement in the strength of the Eastern Fleet. He considered he had "enough troops now to initiate operations against both Upper and Lower Burma but further reserves

<sup>21</sup> Telegram No. OZ 465 dated 12.6.42, from Air Ministry to C-in-C.

<sup>22</sup> No. 14299 C dated 14 June 1942, Appendix 'E', File No. 601/7403/H.



would be required to exploit success.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, though nothing finally was decided, planning continued during the rainy season for operations both in Upper Burma and on the Arakan coast, which was greatly encouraged by the decreasing danger of invasion of India by Japan. The plans were either for limited objectives or were directed towards the major objective of recapturing Burma.

A plan of operations against Upper Burma to take place during the winter of 1942-43, was known by the code word of “Ambulance”, while another, an amphibious operation against Lower Burma, was called “Probation” or later “Cannibal” against Akyab. “Ambulance” was to be executed by the IV Corps consisting of the 17th, 23rd and 39th Indian Divisions, with the 70th British Division in reserve, and the 14th Indian Division, located in the Comilla-Chittagong area, as link-up between the two operations. For “Probation” were assigned the 2nd Division (British), and the 29th Infantry Brigade Group (British) as assault troops (as they had training in combined operations); and three follow-up divisions—the 19th and the 7th Indian Divisions and the 20th Indian Division or the 5th British Division, with necessary armoured formations and force troops. Moreover, owing to the uncertainty of executing “Ambulance”, and as an alternative to it, a limited plan, “Damocles” or “Revenous” was considered for the capture of Akyab, northern Arakan, Chin Hills and Somra Tracts.

For the capture of Akyab, two other plans were also prepared which were known as “Canny” and “Nibble”. The former related to seaborne assault on Akyab and its retention, while “Nibble” was to be operated by the 14th Indian Division whose role was to capture Akyab by overland advance. “Probation” combined both these aspects and was more elaborate than these. Its object was the capture of Rangoon which was planned to be executed in three stages. Operation instructions were also issued from time to time. The one on 14 June 1942, directed to the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Army, desired a more forward policy to be adopted in the Chittagong area. Instruction 11, dated 17 September 1942, further amplified the necessary measures for reoccupying Upper Arakan, capturing Akyab and strengthening position in the Chin Hills. The capture of Akyab by land advance and its retention were to be a combined operation in which navy, army and air forces were to participate. A Parachute Brigade was also to be made available. The object was to capture Akyab by an amphibious operation and then to hold it to enable aircraft to operate from there as soon as possible.

For advance in and recapture of Upper Burma, the preliminary

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, para 5.



occupation of Fort Hertz and building up a force and a system of intelligence there were essential. An officer was therefore deputed to proceed by air to Fort Hertz and organise Burma Levies and collect information. It was then intended to send troops to Fort Hertz by air, the code-word for which operation was "Pillar". A parachute force from the 50th Parachute Brigade was also to be dropped in Fort Hertz area, the code-word for which operation was "Firepump". Similarly a detachment of the 50th Parachute Brigade was to be dropped in the Myitkyina area (code-name "Puddle") whose role was to collect information relating to the Japanese build-up and means of transportation and relations between the Japanese and the local inhabitants. "Puddle" was carried out on 4 July 1942, and the men moved towards Fort Hertz. The main operation, however, was contemplated with the object of developing communications and establishing a favourable position for reconquering Burma and re-opening the Burma Road at the first opportunity, and to bring the "Japanese to battle with the purpose of using up their strength, particularly in the air".<sup>24</sup> The immediate steps to attain this object were, besides the capture of Akyab and Upper Arakan, to strengthen the position in the Chin Hills, occupy Kalewa and Sittaung as a preliminary to the raid on the Japanese lines of communication and to make all administrative preparations which would allow rapid advance of a force towards Upper or Lower Burma. The Eastern Army was therefore directed firstly to establish regular forces at Tiddim and Tamu and then to capture Kalewa and Sittaung, and thereby deny the use of the river Chindwin to the Japanese. The purpose of this operation was to intercept the Japanese line of communication, and for that object the employment of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade as a deep penetration group was envisaged.

#### *Planning for Assistance to China*

While planning was proceeding in these directions in India, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek in China had been keen to undertake offensive operations from Yunnan against the Japanese, in order to expedite the opening of the communications between China and India. For this purpose co-operation of India was essential. The Generalissimo desired a co-ordinated offensive in which the Indian forces would move from the Hukawng Valley to Mogaung and Myitkyina, while the Chinese would advance from Yunnan to Bhamo and Lashio and thus open up a road. At the moment the Allied Nations were keen to aid China and from there launch a bombing offensive against Japan. Political policy and strategy both demanded

<sup>24</sup> GHQ Operation Instruction 11, given in Appendix F to Wavell's *Despatch*, *op. cit.*



the improvement of communications to China, which might be effected by opening a land route from India. Between October and December 1942, many conferences were held between General Wavell and General Stilwell and their staff to determine the future strategy. The plans prepared by the India Command came up for review at these meetings and the weaknesses and deficiencies of the forces were examined.

In the first meeting on 18 October 1942, General Wavell explained the trend of his planning for offensive operations in Burma, and pointed out that owing to the "low capacity of the railway and river communications to Assam", "a very high rate of sickness amongst the troops", and the diversion of "aircraft, troops and equipment intended for India" to the Middle East, he had been reluctantly compelled to put off "any advance in force against Northern Burma" till 1 March 1943. But "he hoped to advance at an earlier date in the south down the Arakan Coast", and in addition "he was planning a small combined operation for the capture of Akyab". He had no intention to stage another withdrawal. Hence his immediate objective for the winter of 1942-43 was to be northern Arakan, the Chin Hills and the Upper Chindwin.<sup>25</sup>

The Chinese memorandum was also discussed, but it was realised that naval control over the Bay of Bengal and the feasibility of major combined operations against Lower Burma depended on air superiority which would not be attained by March 1943. It was, therefore, decided to leave the date of major offensive operations indefinite but to continue planning on the basis of the Chinese memorandum and the earlier plans of the India Command. Meanwhile in another conference on 27 October 1942, the role of the Chinese forces in India was defined. "It was agreed that the force should be based on Ledo and should move *via* the Hukawng Valley to establish itself in the area of Myitkyina-Bhamo, with the object of obtaining the use of the aerodrome at Myitkyina and denying it to the Japanese by making contact with Chinese troops advancing west from Yunnan."

In November 1942, the Joint Planning Staff examined the problem of the reconquest of Burma again. At the 52nd meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee on 16 November 1942, the Commander-in-Chief pointed out that "there were really three plans on which work was in progress". The first was for the reoccupation of Upper Burma by (i) an advance by British and Indian troops to the Chindwin and beyond, (ii) an advance by the Chinese troops training at Ramgarh under the command of the Commander-in-Chief, India, down the Ledo-Hukawng Valley route, and (iii) opera-

<sup>25</sup> General Wavell's *Despatch* (2nd), Appendix 'F', File No. 7401.



tions by Chinese forces operating from Yunnan under the command of General Chiang Kai-shek. The second plan related to a seaborne expedition against Rangoon, which depended on an adequate supply of ships, aircraft and landing craft which were not likely to be available for some time. Hence this plan was merely a long term plan for the future. The third plan was that for the capture of Akyab "which would be of value as an advanced air base for attacking Japanese aerodromes and therefore for the defence of India". It was found that the existing resources were insufficient to launch immediately on any active major operations.

The Joint Planning Staff also re-examined the problem and in their Paper No. 40, dated 27 November 1942, made a forecast of the timing of operations. They fixed the D day as 15 February 1943, with assault on Akyab, and suggested the launching of operations by the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade on 1 February, while Chinese offensive from Yunnan would commence on 1 March and from Ledo in the first week of March, and the IV Corps operations across Chindwin would begin on 15 March 1943. The Chiefs of Staff were in general agreement with it and emphasised the necessity of an earlier assault on Akyab by Eastern Army.

The Joint Planning Staff further examined the plans of operations, and in their papers, dated 1 December and 19 December 1942 respectively, came to the conclusion that "large scale Sino-Anglo-American operations in Upper Burma"<sup>26</sup> were not possible in the winter of 1942-43 owing to administrative reasons and other factors. Their appreciation of the Japanese strength and intentions was that their weakness in the air and the drain on their resources would preclude them "from undertaking anything more than limited operations against India". The Joint Intelligence Committee, both in London and in India, had agreed that the Japanese were unlikely to carry out a major seaborne invasion of India. To meet the threat in Upper Burma they might, however, concentrate their forces there. On the other hand, the administrative difficulties owing to the limitations of road construction would prevent either the Chinese forces or the IV Corps from making any considerable advance beyond the Chindwin, except for local raids. Hence the recommendation of the Joint Planning Staff was that "planning for an Anglo-American-Chinese occupation of Upper Burma in the dry weather" should be discontinued; the IV Corps should advance only to enable "mobile raiding parties to operate in Burma" and road construction should continue during summer; while Chinese forces should not move to Ledo.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in Paper No. 37, the Joint Planning

<sup>26</sup> JPS Paper No. 41, dated 1 December 1942, "Plans for Burma, Spring 1943," p. 8, para 52.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, page 1, para 3.



Staff reiterated their opposition to major offensive operations in the dry weather of 1942-43. Hence they thought of alternative courses, as "the recapture of Burma is not necessarily an essential first step in an offensive by the United Nations aimed at bringing about the rapid downfall of Japan".<sup>28</sup> The alternative proposed was that of an assault on northern Sumatra and consolidating the position in that theatre of the long extended perimeter of the Japanese possessions, as that was not strongly held.

Thus, at the end of December 1942, the position was least optimistic for offensive operations to commence in that winter. At the sixty-fourth meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee on 20 December, at which General Stilwell and Admiral Somerville were present, the Commander-in-Chief in India, General Wavell, made it quite clear that the administrative difficulties made it impossible for him either to concentrate the Chinese force at Ledo or to substantially help Chinese offensive from Yunnan by staging an advance beyond the Chindwin, and thus draw large Japanese forces from concentrating against the Chinese.

At the end of 1942, the only offensive operation which was well advanced in planning was that for the capture of Akyab, to make the aerodromes on the Arakan coast available so as to facilitate combined operations against Lower Burma subsequently, when the resources were freed from other theatres on the defeat of Germany and Italy. The India Command seems to have had little interest in the plans for the capture of Upper Burma which had the primary object of opening communications with China only, on which General Chiang Kai-shek and President Roosevelt were keen. Therefore, while, for political reasons, it entertained the plans for the capture of Upper Burma, it was keen only about Lower Burma and amphibious operations against northern Sumatra or Malaya. But as no major seaborne expedition was practicable unless the war in Europe had been concluded, all that might be done from India was to have operations overland during the winter of 1943-44.<sup>29</sup>

The Arakan expedition was the only operation which was mounted in any strength in the winter of 1942-43. The advance of the IV Corps into Upper Burma, to establish itself on the Chindwin river for the strategic objective of assisting the Chinese advance, did not materialise except for strong offensive patrols in the Kabaw Valley. But the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade (Wingate Force) was used as a Long Range Penetration Group and spent four months inside the territory occupied by the Japanese. It suffered heavy losses, though ample experience was gained in this method

<sup>28</sup> JPS Paper No. 37, dated 19-12-42, p. 1, para 14.

<sup>29</sup> JPS Paper No. 48, dated 23 December, 1942, p. 1, para 3.



of warfare. Hence, till the end of the monsoon of 1943, no appreciable progress had been made in taking the initiative in offensive action for the recapture of Burma, and planning had to be undertaken afresh for operations to commence in the dry weather after the monsoon of 1943.<sup>30</sup>

The appreciations during this period revealed that while Japan might assemble "up to 12 divisions, naval landing parties equivalent to one division and four to six tank regiments for operations against India",<sup>31</sup> the inadequate air cover and shipping limitations made it improbable that operations should proceed against any part of India, except the north-east.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, it was believed that priority would be given to the invasion of Yunnan and that "Japan will not in the next six months launch a major offensive against India."<sup>33</sup> This was more true of any landing assaults on the Indian coast. But not even a sturdy optimist could forecast at the moment that the Japanese would weaken their hold on Burma, or allow the Allies to recapture it without stiff resistance. There were also indications that the Japanese would remain on the defensive in Burma for which purpose they had adequate strength.

The Japanese strength in Burma was appreciated to be eight divisions of the land forces and 300 aircraft, while they had two cruisers, twelve destroyers and fifteen submarines at Singapore for service in the Burmese waters. As for reinforcements, while holding the view that without difficulty the land forces in Burma might be increased up to the limit of maintenance capacity, it was not believed that the existing land forces would be increased by more than one division or that such reinforcements would be located elsewhere than in Lower Burma.

In January 1943, the Joint Planning Staff made a forecast of Japanese strength in the autumn of 1943.<sup>34</sup> Their appreciation was that unless the Japanese were engaged in a war with Russia, they would experience no shortage of land forces and that they would be able to accumulate sufficient reserves of warlike stores for eight divisions for one year. It was also felt that unless Japanese morale was undermined, they would be expected to "fight any defensive operations with extreme stubbornness".<sup>35</sup> Both Mandalay and Rangoon areas would be strongly defended. As against these factors, the appreciation took note of the effect of the war in Europe on the Japanese morale and resources. There were indications that during

<sup>30</sup> See Chapter V below.

<sup>31</sup> JIC India Appreciation DMI/836 dated 20 March 1943 on "Japanese Naval, Army & Air Strength", page 5, para 10(a).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, para 10(e).

<sup>33</sup> Appreciation by JIC (I) dated 10.12.42, "To decide what action the Japanese are likely to take in Burma during the first five months of 1943", p. 2, para 4(a).

<sup>34</sup> JPS Paper No. 47 dated 26 January 1943.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, para 4(b) 1, page 2, Pt. 1.



1943 war situation in Europe would incline in favour of the Allies as both Italy and Germany were expected to be defeated. This development was likely "to have an adverse effect on Japanese morale principally among the higher ranks of the Civil Services and armed forces and those 'in the know'".<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the events in the Pacific led to the assumption that the Japanese would feel "the effects of an increasing shortage of both Naval and Merchant ships and of air force".<sup>37</sup> These factors would, it was believed, considerably embarrass the Japanese in Burma.

The Joint Planning Staff prepared an appreciation for the reconquest of Burma, on the assumption that a major offensive would be undertaken in the winter of 1943-44 with the "minimum object of recapturing Rangoon and reopening communications connecting Lower and Upper Burma".<sup>38</sup> They examined the possibility of capturing Rangoon in one dry season by land as well as by a direct seaborne attack. Their appreciation, however, was that while for the former prospects were small, the latter was impracticable. The earliest date by which operations might commence was mid-November 1943, but physical difficulties and lack of proper lines of communication made rapid reconquest of Burma impossible. The main bottleneck was the difficulty of maintenance which depended on road construction, which however was proceeding slowly on account of the nature of the country. The alternative was the maintenance of troops by air, but the prospects of adequate air transport being available were extremely remote. This made the task of reoccupying Burma in one dry season impossible unless factors elsewhere greatly depleted the Japanese strength there.

This appreciation was, nevertheless, based on the possibility of the reconquest in one campaigning season, and included preliminary naval and air operations and simultaneous advance in Upper Burma, Lower Burma and against Rangoon. The strategy underlying the plan was to "bring superior land forces against the enemy by operating on a very wide front and by making use of as many routes as possible leading into Burma".<sup>39</sup> By this means, if natural difficulties were overcome, it was possible to exploit any Japanese weakness in Burma by creating a situation in which they would have to meet all threats at once. But the Joint Planning Staff realised the limitations of such an operation, and held the view that "either we must capture Rangoon and gain the use of all-weather communications through Burma before the monsoon begins, or else our advance must

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, para 3(a), Pt. I.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, para 3(b), Pt. I.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, page 1, para 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, page 4, para 13.



be confined to the areas to which we can extend such communications".<sup>40</sup>

They first discussed the possibilities of capturing Rangoon as soon as practicable. For that operation a force up to three divisions was required with an adequate measure of fighter cover. If such air support was available, the best and most direct method of attacking Rangoon would be by means of a seaborne expedition. For that purpose they examined the Bassein, Moulmein and Rangoon areas as disembarkation points.

They examined next the factors underlying the operations in Upper and Lower Burma. As a preliminary to these, it was essential to interrupt sea lines of communication of the Japanese and thus prevent them from building up their reserves. But having no forward bases from which naval surface forces might operate, the only means was to employ submarines and aircraft. Submarines were not sufficient in number and aircraft, too, which might attack shipping or the port of Rangoon and mine the approaches to Rangoon harbour, were also not available in adequate strength. However, these modes of preliminary attack were to be employed. At the same time emphasis was laid on air superiority which was practicable, as there would be 40 squadrons available in autumn which might be increased if the European situation improved. To achieve such air superiority as would attack Japanese lines of communication, protect Allied shipping and assault convoys and undertake strategic bombing of Central Burma, it was essential to have landing grounds on the Arakan coast.

Operations in Upper Burma would be directed against Japanese communications which converged in the area Mandalay-Thazi-Pakokku. Hence all forces had to be concentrated towards this objective, and for that purpose the use of Kalewa-Ye-U-Tiddim-Kan-Pakokku and river Chindwin line of communication was advocated. But the British and Indian forces alone would not be able to undertake this task with their maximum strength of three divisions. Hence Chinese co-operation was to be sought who might operate from Yunnan and/or Ledo. Owing to the maintenance difficulties even this force would not be in a position to assemble more than three to five divisions from Yunnan. Ledo force would, however, be more useful, but there was not much reliance on its effective co-operation. These operations could not commence before mid-November owing to health reasons and administrative difficulties.

The operations in Lower Burma were to be directed ultimately towards the capture of Rangoon, and had to be amphibious in their nature. To make any headway, Akyab, Ramree Island and

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, para 14.



Kyaukpyu must be captured before the beginning of the cold weather of 1943-44, otherwise the operations would be proportionately delayed. The next objective was Taungup, for the capture of which seaborne assault, land forces operating from Letpan and parachutist troops had to be employed. Next to Taungup, the capture of Sandoway and Mazin was essential to obtain landing grounds for the support of operations further south. The most important point on this line, however, was Bassein, the difficulties of capturing which were fully realised. Use of parachutists, assault forces and seaborne expedition up the Bassein river, all might be necessary. When forces had been established in Taungup and Bassein, attack on Rangoon might proceed, for which it was necessary to force the passage of the Irrawaddy near Prome. Advance both from Taungup and Bassein was considered.

The outline plan, therefore, provided for attacks on Japanese air installations and lines of communication and naval operations primarily directed against sea communications with Rangoon, in addition to operations in Upper and Lower Burma.

This appreciation was intended to be a mere basis for calculating the required resources and for detailed planning, if the objective was clearly defined.

On the basis of the above appreciation, the Joint Planning Staff, on 1 February 1943, further examined the "requirements necessary to implement a plan to reconquer Burma in one dry-weather season".<sup>41</sup> They expressed the view that to eliminate Japanese opposition quickly "we must be prepared to accept very heavy casualties and thus must start the operation with a large superiority of force".<sup>42</sup> Hence, they estimated a force of at least six divisions for Lower Burma only. The timings were slightly modified in this appreciation. The operations would commence about the middle of December instead of in November. The capture of airfields at Akyab, Kyaukpyu, Sandoway, Gwa and Bassein, which might be achieved in December, would be followed by the capture of Rangoon in January. The operations in Upper Burma would be so timed as to "contain as many Japanese forces as possible in Upper Burma in order to reduce their strength in Lower Burma",<sup>43</sup> and would begin in December 1943. It was their view further that capture of Rangoon by direct assault from sea could not be planned with reasonable chance of success.

With the preliminary reports of the Joint Planning Staff, the Chiefs of Staff Committee, on 3 February 1943, further examined the question of the reconquest of Burma in the dry season of 1943-44.

<sup>41</sup> JPS Paper dated 2 February 1943.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, page 2, para 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, page 2, para 9.



The main outline of the operation envisaged by them was as follows:—

### *Upper Burma*

- “(a) Advance by Indian forces from Imphal and the Chinese forces from Yunnan on the Mandalay area.
- (b) Advance by the Chinese troops from Ledo and a Chinese force from Paoshan on Myitkyina and Bhamo”.

The main Chinese forces were to advance from western Yunnan in the general direction of Myitkyina, Bhamo, Lashio and eventually Mandalay. Their offensive was to take the form of the following thrusts:—

- (i) From Tengchung towards Myitkyina
- (ii) From Paoshan towards Bhamo
- (iii) From the Lungling area towards Lashio
- (iv) From Puerh towards Kegtung

The forces involved were to amount to 10 or 11 divisions, each 10,000 strong. In addition to these, a Chinese Corps of 30,000 was to advance from Ledo down the Hukawng Valley towards Myitkyina. Further, to guard against a Japanese offensive from Indo-China, a Chinese force of about three Armies (each of two divisions) was to be maintained in the Kunming area.

### *Lower Burma*

- “(a) Simultaneous landing at Kyaukpyu, Sandoway, Gwa and West of Bassein with the object of capturing the airfields there.
- (b) A landing at Taungup, followed by the advance of a force of about one division towards Prome and the Rangoon road, with the object of containing enemy forces and cutting communications from Rangoon to the north.
- (c) The capture and development of the Port of Bassein, followed by the advance of a force of about one division towards Henzada and Rangoon.
- (d) A direct assault on Rangoon by airborne troops and from the sea.”<sup>44</sup>

To implement this plan it was considered necessary that the Japanese naval threat to the convoys and assault shipping should be eliminated, and for that purpose it was essential to strengthen the Eastern Fleet. In respect of land operations, large superiority of forces was a pre-requisite, hence the Committee recommended the employment of six divisions against Upper Burma and another six divisions against Lower Burma. They considered the capture of Rangoon

<sup>44</sup> Wavell's *Despatch* on Operations in the India Command, 1 January to 20 June 1943, Appendix D.



by direct assault as the only means for the reoccupation of Burma in one dry season. It had to be "a bold and hazardous operation".

This Outline Plan was accepted in its essentials by the Conference of American, British, Chinese and Indian officials, held in Delhi and Calcutta between 1 and 9 February 1943. It was agreed further that a major offensive would not begin "until November 1943 and that the intervening period should be utilised by the Indian and Chinese forces in engaging in minor offensive actions with the object of gaining positions for main offensive and in road making and administrative preparations"<sup>45</sup> The Conference considered the "possibility of overland advance from Bassein as main operation against Rangoon", but felt that it did not "afford reasonable chance of taking Rangoon in one dry season".<sup>46</sup> Hence, in spite of the hazards involved, they accepted the plan of direct assault, as it would "help to achieve surprise and good cover plan of the utmost importance. Further, if Rangoon assault was unsuccessful Bassein bridgehead could still be developed as main line of advance on Rangoon".<sup>47</sup> The Conference also considered the requirements and was of the view that India could not carry out the plan with her own resources. Field Marshal Wavell, in his telegram to the Chiefs of Staff, dated 10 February 1943, indicated the deficiencies and pressed for an early provision. He desired the Eastern Fleet to be reinforced. He further asked for six to nine assault brigades of which India had only four at the moment. The rest had to come complete in every respect from outside India. He also asked for a second parachute brigade and two additional divisions as reserve in India. Additional air force of the order of 240 fighters, 90 light and medium bombers, 125 heavy bombers and 200 transport aircraft were also required. To implement the plan training had to commence early.

While this Outline Plan was being finally considered by the higher authorities, Field Marshal Wavell was conceiving bolder adventures, as he did not seem to have much confidence in the effectiveness of this plan and desired "to look elsewhere for a speedy and effective blow against Japanese line."<sup>48</sup> Hence he desired plans to be prepared for the control of the Sunda Straits between Sumatra and Java and for the capture of a base in north Sumatra to control the Malacca Straits. This operation, he thought, would go "far towards the defeat of Japan".<sup>49</sup> This measure could give surprise which the Burma operations would not. It is clear from his note to the Secretary, Joint Planning Staff, of 16 February 1943, that he was not prepared to execute the plan of the reconquest of Burma,

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, para 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, Appendix F, para 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, para 3.





Field-Marshal  
Sir Archibald P. Wavell



Major-General R. A. Savory  
Commander 23rd Indian Division





Major-General  
O. C. Wingate  
(right) and  
Major Ander-  
son after the  
end of the first  
Wingate Ex-  
pedition

Disguised as a Burman, a Gurkha soldier is seen with two of his comrades at the  
end of the first Wingate Expedition





except as an instrument of surprise for the execution of the Sumatra-Java operations.<sup>50</sup>

However, on the basis of the appreciations and Outline Plan prepared in February, operation instructions were issued to General Sir George Giffard, K.C.B., D.S.O., General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Army, and Major General R. A. Wheeler, U.S. Army, defining their tasks for the winter of 1943-44 and allotting their spheres of action. General Giffard was to command the seaborne operations against the Arakan coast. It is clear from these instructions that by the end of March limited offensive operations for the reconquest of Burma had held the ground. The American Commander was to be responsible for all land operations which were planned to develop in his area, which included the base at Ledo and the road forward towards Shingbuiyang, and his immediate tasks included (a) preventing Japanese advance into India by the approaches to Ledo from the east and southeast and (b) covering the construction of the road forward from Ledo. The main object of the Allied operations, during the winter, was defined to be to re-establish by May 1944 through communications between Rangoon and Lashio, as the primary purpose at that date was to maintain the Chinese in the war as long as possible, for which the opening of the Burma Road was a pre-requisite.

Another purpose which was greatly emphasised by the Anglo-American Chiefs of Staff was to maintain the supplies to China, for which the security of the air lift route and the construction of Ledo road to connect with the Burma-Yunnan Road were essential. An overall effort by land and seaborne operations directed towards the capture of Rangoon and making safe the communications of the north was required; hence the Outline Plan, described above, was adopted.

Soon, however, doubts began to be entertained about the efficacy or economy of that effort. It is clear from Field Marshal Wavell's note, mentioned earlier, that he considered the plan to be both costly and tardy, and desired, therefore, to launch an operation against Sumatra which promised better dividends and which would have integrated the Indian effort with that of Australia and America in the south-west Pacific. This tendency to view the Japanese repulse in wider perspective and to concentrate on the strategy of defeat of the Japanese, initiated by Field Marshal Wavell, found its echo in the plans and decisions arrived at during the summer of 1943. Earlier also, at the Casablanca Conference held towards the end of January 1943, similar ideas had been entertained by the British representatives, who wanted to concentrate on the defeat of Germany

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, Appendix 'F'.



in 1943 instead of a costly operation in Burma. On the other hand, the American representatives had expressed the fear that Britain might "pull out once Germany was defeated",<sup>51</sup> leaving Japan in possession of her conquests. They were, however, categorically assured by Mr. Churchill of the "determination of the British Parliament and people to devote their whole resources to the defeat of Japan after Germany had been brought to her knees".<sup>52</sup> The policy of giving priority to the defeat of Germany was finally approved by the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. As regards Japan, it was decided that pressure would be maintained against her, though a full-scale offensive might be launched only after the defeat of Germany when resources for the defeat of Japan were available from the western theatre of war.

The Joint Planning Staff of the War Cabinet in the United Kingdom considered the Indian plan of the reconquest of Burma (Anakim) in the light of the general strategy laid down at Casablanca. It was clear that the United Nations had placed first priority on the defeat of Germany, without the achievement of which resources adequate for the defeat of Japan would not be available. The Combined Chiefs of Staff had, therefore, defined their policy towards Japan,<sup>53</sup> as follows:—

"To maintain pressure on Japan with the forces allocated, retain the initiative and attain a position of readiness for the full-scale offensive against Japan by the United Nations as soon as Germany is defeated.

"These operations must be kept within such limits as will not jeopardise the capacity of the United Nations to take advantage of any favourable opportunity that may present itself for the decisive defeat of Germany in 1943."

To carry out this policy the strategy towards Japan was further analysed by the Combined Chiefs of Staff as below:—

- "(i) Offensive action to prevent the Japanese consolidating their present positions.
- (ii) Offensive action to reduce Japanese naval and air power.
- (iii) Attacks on Japanese shipping, particularly by submarine.
- (iv) The attainment of positions from which to menace enemy communications with the Netherlands East Indies, the Philippines and the South China Sea.
- (v) The opening of a line of communication with China *via* Burma in order to keep China in the war, to use China as a base from which to attack sea communications on the

<sup>51</sup> Churchill: *Hinge of Fate*, page 612.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Note by the Joint Planning Staff: "Policy to be adopted by United Nations towards Japan" (War Cabinet). JP (43) 166. 27.4.43, page 2, para 3.



China coast and in the Formosa Straits, and to keep up pressure on the Japanese in this area."<sup>54</sup>

The War Cabinet, however, were sceptic of the usefulness of the last course (opening of communications with China in order to keep her in the war and use China as a base) and considered that the reconquest of the whole of Burma was not, militarily, an essential step in the final defeat of Japan. They were, nevertheless, in favour of limited land operations to secure Myitkyina airfield to ensure the maximum use of the route of airlift to China.<sup>55</sup>

In consequence of this reasoning and in view of the limited resources available, the Joint Planning Staff outlined the objects of operations in Burma which were:

- "(a) To cover as far as possible the development of the air supply route from Dinjan to Kunming with a view to:
  - (i) maintaining a larger American air force in China,
  - (ii) increasing the flow of supplies to China.
- "(b) To contain and wear down Japanese land and particularly air forces in Burma.
- "(c) To encourage the Chinese and prevent large scale operations against them in Yunnan.
- "(d) To give battle experience to land forces."<sup>56</sup>

To achieve these objects, they suggested the following course of action:

- "(a) In view of the superiority of the Japanese in the jungle country and the impossibility of staging more than limited land operations into Northern Burma, except at the expense of airfield construction, we should give priority in the allocation of available resources to improving the air transport route into China with a view to maintaining a larger American air force in China and increasing supplies to China.
- "(b) Land and seaborne operations based on India should be designed to provide some protection for the air transport route into China, to contain and wear down the Japanese and to give battle training to our troops. These operations should be:
  - (i) An advance from Imphal in December 1943 by up to three divisions plus one Long Range Penetration Group, the forces to be withdrawn on approach of the monsoon.
  - (ii) A concurrent advance from Ledo by Chinese troops (or British if the Chinese refuse) but only if there is

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, para 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, para 17.



no resultant interference with the development of airfields and transportation facilities.

- (iii) The capture of Akyab in December 1943.
- (iv) The subsequent capture of Ramree Island if sufficient assault craft survive and the necessary shipping can be made available."<sup>57</sup>

Thus the Joint Planning Staff of the War Cabinet definitely ruled out the attack on Rangoon both by seaborne and land operations. As a corollary to that, operations against Taungup and Bassein which were subsidiary to the advance on Rangoon were also eliminated. Land operations down the Arakan coast also were not to be pursued, and the measure of land operations in Upper Burma was also reduced, because the only purpose in view was to facilitate air transport to China. The operations against Andamans or assault on north Sumatra followed by a landing on Malaya, as advocated by Field Marshal Wavell, were also considered either of little value or quite beyond the resources in 1943-44. The operations assented to by them were more for morale purposes and soothing the Chinese than for the object of defeating Japan, which was deemed to be impracticable by action in Burma alone. There was a growing realisation that defeat of Japan would come only by action taken from the Russian mainland or by a "hopping" operation in the Pacific. This strategy, therefore, minimised the importance of Burma and lessened the importance of British offensive action there in the ultimate liquidation of Japan.

Operation instructions issued in June reflected this mood. In modification of the instruction of 31 March 1943, General Giffard was assigned a limited task, and that too only for the period during the monsoon. Instructions for action after the monsoon were to be given later.

Thus ended fruitlessly the earlier attempts under Field Marshal Wavell to plan offensive action for the recapture of the whole of Burma. The plan was strategically feasible but it involved utilisation of resources which could be ill-spared at the moment. Moreover, it did not integrate well with the general strategy for the ultimate defeat of Japan, which, it was then assumed, would be effected by action in the Pacific. In pursuit of short cuts to victory, the ambitious plan of the reconquest of Burma in one season was set aside as impracticable. As long as the sole objective of the United Nations in Burma theatre was to assist the Chinese war effort, there was the least possibility of such comprehensive plans of freeing the Indian frontier from Japanese incubus being entertained.

General Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck was appointed the Commander-in-Chief in India on 20 June 1943, in succession to Field

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, para 36.



Marshal Wavel. A little later, at the Quebec Conference in August 1943, a decision was taken to set up a new South-East Asia Command with Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten as the Supreme Allied Commander. But it was not till November 1943 that the new Command started functioning. Hence the responsibility for continuing the planning of future operations and executing them during the monsoon of 1943 remained with the India Command. The earlier attempts to capture Akyab and establish forces on the line of the Chindwin river between Kalewa and Sittaung had failed, and the forces had retreated to their original positions.<sup>58</sup> This setback had greatly affected the morale of the army. Tactics of frontal attack, lack of training in jungle warfare and undeveloped lines of communication had been responsible for the failure. It was, therefore, essential, before fresh offensive might be taken up, that these deficiencies should be remedied. But the physical factors and the necessary time-lag involved in engineering operations made rapid progress impracticable, and it was found that the necessities of maintenance still limited the scope of offensive operations in the winter of 1943-44. This factor accounts for the very limited character of the operations planned by the India Command, prior to the institution of the South-East Asia Command.

The Washington Conference of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, in May 1943, had determined certain priorities and outlined the scope of operations for the India Command. The basic objective of the Allies, in so far as the Eastern Theatre was concerned, was to maintain and extend unremitting pressure against the Japanese and to render utmost assistance to China in order to keep her in the war. For this purpose first priority was given to increasing the air transportation route to China to a monthly capacity of 10,000 tons (later 20,000 tons). All operations in Burma were conditioned by this fact of devoting energies and resources to the building up of the air route to China.

General Auchinleck reviewed the position in the light of the examination by the Joint Planning Staff and communicated his views to the Chiefs of Staff, in his telegram dated 2 July 1943.

The Joint Planning Staff had rightly held the view that "depth of advance must be governed by maintenance position and thus by construction of all-weather roads".<sup>59</sup> All operations except those in Arakan depended on the Assam line of communication, which, apart from meeting military requirements, had also to bear the load of jute and tea traffic in which his Majesty's Government were keenly

<sup>58</sup> For details see *Arakan Operations*, Historical Section.

<sup>59</sup> Telegram No. 58353/COS, dated 2-7-43, from Arminia to Air Ministry (Appx. No. 1 to despatch by General Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck, 21 June 1943 to 15 Nov. 1943).



interested. Air operations against Burma and the increasing load of air ferry to China further added to the weight of burden on that line of communication. The India Command desired air operations to continue, particularly those pertaining to a sustained bombing offensive against strategic objectives. For land operations it was laid down that "only those areas served by all-weather roads, can be permanently occupied".<sup>60</sup> Hence, for the winter of 1943-44, the defined aim was "to reduce gap between our all-weather line of communication and permanent road system in Burma, distance which could be covered in dry season of 44/45. This can be done if all-weather road can be extended to Sittaung and Kalemyo in Burma."<sup>61</sup> On this basis plans during 1943-44 were:

- "(a) Chinese from Yunnan: offensive operations with object containing and destroying maximum Japanese forces and improving position with a view to continuing operations 44/55.
- "(b) Chinese from Ledo: to advance as far towards Myitkyina as subsequent maintenance will permit.
- "(c) British forces on Chindwin: offensive operations with up to three divisions and L.R.P. brigade with object pushing forward all-weather road construction to Sittaung and Kalemyo and maintaining forces covering road-head throughout the subsequent monsoon."<sup>62</sup>

Emphasis was at the same time laid on operations in Arakan. The capture of Akyab was deemed to be of "utmost importance" which would be effected by two assault brigades in the first flight and a third as a follow-up. This was to be supported by "maximum scale air bombardment and fire cover from naval forces".<sup>63</sup> Use of fighter squadrons and carrier borne aircraft was also essential for the success of this effort. To ensure success it was necessary to employ land forces up to two divisions simultaneously on the Arakan coast and one Long Range Penetration Group in the Kaladan river area.

Capture of Ramree Island was also considered but it was felt that, owing to the shortage of shipping, a period of three or four months must intervene between the two amphibious operations. For that operation a force of two assault brigades and one built-up division would be required, besides the employment of Long Range Penetration Brigade on the mainland. The Joint Planning Staff attached great importance to the operations on the Arakan coast because, owing to the limitations of Assam line of communication, operations in Upper Burma in any depth would not proceed and because capture

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*



of Akyab was so closely associated with prestige and morale. Hence they desired that sufficient resources should be allotted for this operation to assure success. The earliest when the assault could proceed was January 1944. But prior to that and subsequent to the monsoon, operations from Imphal and from Ledo might commence for which necessary forces were available. On these lines General Auchinleck had issued instructions to the Eastern Army to complete their plans and do the provisioning.

Before preparations were effective, serious floods in Bengal affected the lines of communication and it was apprehended that excessive deficiencies would occur in the maintenance programme. It became necessary therefore to reconsider the plan of operations. General Auchinleck in a telegram to the Chiefs of Staff discussed the effects of the deficiencies on various operations. It is clear from his communication that there was no early prospect of operations in Upper Burma and that he was inclined to give preference to the operations on the Arakan coast, particularly the land operations for the capture of Akyab, as it did not appear practicable to execute the amphibious operations against that island. But even such a limited programme of offensive action was likely to militate against effective prosecution of the development of airfields in Bengal and Assam. Priority had been assigned to air operations by the Washington Conference. Hence the Commander-in-Chief, on the advice of Air Commanding-in-Chief, was prepared to put off operations both land and amphibious ('Cudgel' and 'Bullfrog') on the Arakan coast and devote all energies to air development. In conclusion he wrote: "Fully appreciate pressure which is being brought to bear on you in favour of starting large-scale offensive operations against Burma this coming winter and believe you are fully aware of the disadvantages of this course. But the course of planning for even the limited operation included in "Champion" (exploitation of land advance in Burma) has brought me to the conclusion that the best military course would be to avoid wasting effort on this unprofitable objective and to concentrate on supply to China by air at the same time increasing and conserving the strength of India and preparing resources for 'Culverin' (operations for the capture of north Sumatra) next winter. Preparations for 'Culverin' would enable us to bring training of troops to high standard. If 'Culverin' were definitely decided for 1944/45 it would be desirable to divert resources from "Bullfrog" (amphibious operations for the capture of Akyab) to 'Buccaneer' (operations against Andaman Islands) in the late spring of 1944."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Telegram No. 65566/COS, dated 13-8-43, from Arminia to Air Ministry (Appendix No. 2, to despatch by General Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck, 21 June to 15 November 1943).



General Auchinleck had to suggest this course in view of the priority which was given by the United Nations to the support of China and air development. But on a fuller examination of the situation arising out of the floods, the Eastern Army prepared an Outline Plan for limited offensive in Arakan and holding up action on the Assam front. It was based on the principle that "the adoption of a purely defensive military and air policy on either Corps front is highly undesirable. In both areas (Arakan and Assam) such an attitude would considerably encourage the Japanese and invite him to attack us, with all the attendant advantages of the loss of initiative to us. It would be bad for the morale of all our forces, military and air, and for all the irregular forces at present helping us. It would be bad for public opinion."<sup>65</sup> Hence, keeping fully in view the relative limitations of maintenance on the two fronts, the Eastern Army decided on giving preference to operations in Arakan. Their basic policy was to provide, first, for all essential resources for the XV Corps operations in Arakan and then to allot available resources for any operations, offensive and defensive, on the IV Corps front. They also realised the dearth of airfields in the IV Corps area and accepted as a priority requirement the development of temporary strips in the Imphal and Tamu areas. Taking these factors into consideration their conclusion was that "while we may be forced upon the defensive on IV Corps front by adverse administrative conditions there will still remain a minimum target for operations in this area which we should accept and make possible".<sup>66</sup> For the other front, they decided on the "earlier offensive necessary to gain and maintain the initiative".<sup>67</sup> Air Force action was to be directed towards "the destruction of enemy lines of communication in the Arakan front".<sup>68</sup>

This Outline Plan (Bigot) of 25 August 1943 took full account of the possibilities of Japanese offensive. The appreciation was based on the Japanese strength of four divisions, which might not be adequate for any major offensive without reinforcement. But such reinforcement was practicable, hence offensive operations might be undertaken, which were arranged according to their priority as "northwards in the Arakan, in the Chin Hills, or towards the Digboi-Ledo-Margherita area. The first two might be undertaken simultaneously."<sup>69</sup> It was also likely that even without offensive reinforcements, the Japanese would launch limited offensives in these areas, as soon as weather improved. From this appreciation natural-

<sup>65</sup> HQ Eastern Army and Air HQ Bengal Outline Plan No. 2: Operations 1943-44, dated 25 August 1943, page 1, para 5, File No. F 46.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, para 5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, para 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, para 7.



ly followed the necessity of undertaking offensive operations, particularly in the Arakan area, for by that means the defence of the frontiers would be ensured.

Very comprehensive calculations were made of the available resources in men and material and their disposition between the two fronts. On the XV Corps front, for offensive operations, a force was to be employed "to overcome the prepared Japanese defences on the Mayu peninsula",<sup>70</sup> while another "strong striking force"<sup>71</sup> was to be used "on the Kaladan River in order to widen the front of operations and to protect our left flank".<sup>72</sup>

Operations on this front might commence before 15 January 1944. On the other front the minimum targets were defined as follows:

- "(a) To forestall the Japanese on the west bank of the Chindwin river as early as the weather will permit.
- "(b) To recapture the stockades area and drive the Japanese from the Chin Hills.
- "(c) To carry out raids with limited objectives not involving an extension of maintenance organisation.
- "(d) To bluff the Japanese into believing that we intend a large scale operation in this area."

For these objectives a force of three divisions was required. The Long Range Penetration Groups were to be used, one on the IV Corps front and the other in the country between the Chindwin and Kaladan rivers.

The Quebec Conference of the Chiefs of Staff, in August 1943, modified the basis of operational planning in India. Whereas the Washington Conference had laid emphasis mainly on the air ferry to China, the Quebec decision gave "first priority to the land and air operations which would be necessary to establish land communications with China."<sup>73</sup> It was of course not the intention to adopt the new course in supersession of the earlier objective, for even the Quebec Conference "decided to continue to build up and increase the air routes and air supplies to China and to develop the resources of that country",<sup>74</sup> primarily to intensify operations against Japan. The Quebec decisions also directed preparations to be continued "for an amphibious operation in the spring of 1944".<sup>75</sup> Instructions were issued to study future plans for all these operations. The Quebec decisions brought to view the possibility of a major enterprise

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, page 7, para 39(a)(i).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, para 39(a)(ii).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> General Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck's *Despatch* for the period 21 June to 15 November 1943, p. 2, para 3.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, page 7,



against Japan, the form of which would be land and air operations for the capture of Upper Burma, offensive operations in Arakan, capture of Akyab and Sumatra and attack on Rangoon. This comprehensive object for which planning had proceeded earlier was to be revived, and in the new aspect of increasing resources of the United Nations, a major offensive against Japan in Burma and South-East Asia was envisaged.

The Quebec decisions were communicated to the India Command on 26 August 1943. General Auchinleck immediately desired these schemes to be examined by the Planning Staff. The result of this fresh examination was that the aspect of operations in Upper Burma underwent a radical change. From being a mere local offensive-defensive action to contain some Japanese forces, it developed into a resolve to conduct vigorous and aggressive land and air operations at the end of the 1943 monsoon, from Assam into Burma *via* Ledo and Imphal, and this was to be in step with an advance by the Chinese forces from Yunnan. The object was to contain as many Japanese forces as possible and to cover the air ferry route with the definite object of reopening land communications with China by means of a road from Ledo *via* Myitkyina to be connected with the existing road north to Lashio.<sup>76</sup>

The first plan was communicated to the Chiefs of Staff on 7 September 1943, and it included, besides Chinese operations based on Yunnan and Ledo, two alternative operations for the Indian forces based on Imphal-Tiddim area. The first included an advance to the area Kalewa-Kalemyo and thence to Ye-U. The second related to "an operation for the capture of the Indaw area (with its airfields) by airborne assault, followed by an advance overland to consolidate the capture. This force would depend on air supply until the Chinese advance from the north opened a route for maintenance by land."<sup>77</sup> Long Range Penetration Groups were to be used in either of the two schemes. General Auchinleck favoured the first, but the Chiefs of Staff preferred the second, as it would enable contact with the Chinese advance from Ledo and Yunnan and because it had a greater element of surprise. The second plan was therefore preferred. The Outline Plan provided for Indaw airfields being seized by parachute troops and thereafter a division (less one brigade) being flown in. "A third brigade with mules and jeeps was to advance overland from Imphal to Indaw. This was to be coupled with a limited offensive-defensive operation southwards from Tamu, as well as with the Chinese advance from Ledo and Yunnan on Myitkyina, Bhamo and Lashio.. Offensive operations in Arakan were also to be timed to take place so as to have the maximum dis-

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, page 5, para 4.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*.



tracting effect on the enemy. Finally the advance of the main forces towards their objectives was to be preceded and assisted by long range penetration forces."<sup>78</sup> This plan was, in essentials, the same as had been considered earlier when the reconquest of the whole of Burma was the objective. The Arakan plan also embraced amphibious operations. Thus, the consideration of these plans along with the ambitious and enterprising ventures for the capture of north Sumatra, Singapore, Andaman Islands and the Isthmus of Kra, which were then being planned, indicate the desire of the United Nations to take to offensive action against Japan and undertake an all-out effort to oust her from South-East Asia. The establishment of a new operational command for South-East Asia showed the earnestness of the Allies. The planning which had been pursued by the India Command was transferred along with the staff to the new command, which thenceforward took over the responsibility of planning for the reconquest of Burma.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*



## CHAPTER III

# Japanese Activity on the Chindwin

1942-43

DURING THE MONSOON, 1942

As described in *"The Retreat from Burma"*,<sup>1</sup> the Indo-British troops were forced to withdraw from Burma in the spring of 1942. By the end of April, most of these forces had come across the Chindwin behind the borders of India. In spite of constant harassment by the pursuing Japanese, these troops had fought many heroic rearguard actions, and had staged an organised and orderly withdrawal. Much of the equipment had been lost or abandoned on the way, but this was inevitable as the troops had to fight not only against the Japanese but also against time. They had to reach Assam before the monsoon and they managed to do it just in time.

Meanwhile, the 23rd Indian Division had been ordered to move from Ranchi to the Assam frontier and cover the withdrawal. This division had been formed only in January 1942, and the troops had little training. It was under the command of Major-General R. A. Savory, C.B., D.S.O., M.C., a veteran of the Middle East campaigns of 1940-41 where he had commanded a brigade and fought against the Italians and the Germans. Originally intended for guarding the coasts of Bengal and Orissa against any Japanese landings there, its role was changed, and on 25 April it received orders to proceed to Assam. Its tasks, as defined by the commander, were to "stop the Japanese invading India, and defeat them if they do".<sup>2</sup> By 6 May the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade of this division was partly in Tamu with two of its battalions on their way forward from Kohima. This brigade was to occupy and hold Shenam, while the other two brigades on arrival from India were to be placed in mobile reserve just south-east of Imphal from where offensive operations might be launched.

The situation on the Burma front had lost its poignancy by this time and there stood between Imphal and the Japanese on the Chindwin, in the summer of 1942, the battalions of the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade, namely, 7/14 Punjab, 1 Assam, 1 Patiala and 1

<sup>1</sup> *The Retreat from Burma* Op. cit.

<sup>2</sup> 23 Indian Div. Op. Instrn. No. 1 of 6 May 1945.



Seaforth Highlanders. It is true that this gallant little force of about 3000 could not have withstood a determined Japanese attack, especially when it had had no time to prepare its defences. But it was not alone to face the Japanese advance as more brigades were expected to arrive,<sup>3</sup> and most men of the retreating army had already crossed into India while others were still coming in. The last Indian troops abandoned Kalewa on 12 May 1942. These belonged to the 48th and the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade, the latter forming the rear-guard. The town was thereafter occupied by the Japanese the next day. There was not much fighting after this but the Japanese reconnoitring parties continued to be active. One such party appeared at Kalemmyo on 17 May. Hostile Burmese were also seen on this day 15 miles west of Kalemmyo, on the road to Tiddim. The Japanese air activity was confined to two raids on Imphal on 10 and 16 May and another on Silchar, and repeated reconnaissance and machine-gun attacks by three or four aircraft on Chittagong.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Japanese Concentration at Homalin*

Meanwhile reports were coming in daily that the Japanese were moving up the Chindwin in boats and concentrating a big force at Homalin. From this place they could advance north to Digboi or west to Kohima *via* Ukhrul. For sending troops up the river the Japanese were using paddle steamers, flats and country craft. A paddle steamer could do about four miles an hour upstream and towed two flats alongside. Each flat could carry about 300 tons of cargo which, with approximately 80 tons carried by the steamer itself, gave a total of some 680 tons per paddle steamer. For carrying tanks two boats were lashed together and a tank placed on top of them. The boats were propelled by engines. Men were carried on logs tied behind a motor boat, each log carrying 10 to 12 men sitting astride the log with their feet dangling in the water.<sup>5</sup> Many such convoys were reported towards the end of May, and whenever possible they were bombed by the Allies. The Japanese thereupon started moving by night, and by the end of May were supposed to have collected almost one division at Homalin. It was not known definitely what the Japanese intention was, but the presence of this force at Homalin was a threat to Kohima and Ukhrul and also to the Chinese forces which were withdrawing towards India. From the Japanese own accounts it appears that their intention was to mop up Chinese forces retreating to India.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Other brigades of 23 Div. were to start from Ranchi on 15 May and be in position for action by the end of the month. See Appreciation of Situation by Maj. Gen. R. A. Savory, Tamu, 7 May 42, 601/246/W.D.

<sup>4</sup> Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 29 dated 22 May 1942.

<sup>5</sup> 23 Div. Sitrep, 11 June 1942.

<sup>6</sup> SEATIC Bulletin, No. 245, p. 26.



The original plan of the Chinese forces in Burma had been to withdraw on Katha and Myitkyina. But when, towards the end of April, it had become apparent that Bhamo and Myitkyina were threatened by the Japanese advance through the Shan States, this plan had been modified to the extent that the Chinese Fifth Army would make for India. The 22nd and 96th Divisions of this army marched towards India *via* the Hukawng Valley, but the 38th Division took a different route and had come to the Chindwin from Wuntho after crossing the hills. It reached the Chindwin at Paungbyin, north-east of Tamu, and crossed the river (less 113th Regiment) on 11 May reaching Imphal on 24 May. The 113th Regiment which formed the rearguard, however, could not cross as it met a Japanese force going up the river and was thus cut off on its east bank. It however managed to slip across the river on the night of 30/31 May at Naungsankyin and rejoined the 38th Division, north of Imphal on 9 June. Subsequently, reports began to be received at the 23rd Indian Division's headquarters that the Japanese were gradually vacating Homalin.

Earlier, in May, when the Japanese build-up at Homalin was not known, the commander of the 23rd Indian Division had considered the Shenam-Tamu road as more important strategically, since the Japanese might invade India by that road. The 1st Indian Infantry Brigade had, therefore, been ordered to hold the Shenam position, and it was told that "there will be NO withdrawal from that position".<sup>7</sup> When it was learnt that the Japanese were holding Homalin in strength, the road Homalin-Ukhrul-Imphal assumed greater importance and forces were re-deployed accordingly. The rains had, however, made this road impassable for mechanical transport, and work was thereupon started to improve it. There was a detachment of the 23rd Indian Division at Ukhrul, and if it was to be maintained efficiently or strengthened, the road between Ukhrul and Imphal had to receive the highest priority. In the words of the Divisional Commander, Major-General R. A. Savory, "unless work is begun at once, it may be too late".<sup>8</sup>

The Japanese however had no intention of making any offensive movement at this time, and by the middle of June reports began to come in at the 23rd Indian Division's headquarters that the Japanese were leaving Homalin. Actually, they had started moving southwards from Homalin in the first week of June, though the Indian Division came to know of it only on 16 June.<sup>9</sup> During that month the Japanese continued to withdraw from their northerly positions, and by 25 June, Ya-nan (south of Tamu) and Yuwa and

<sup>7</sup> The 23rd Ind. Div. Op. Instrn. No. 4 dated 25 May.

<sup>8</sup> Major-Gen. Savory's communication to IV Corps, 3 June 1942.

<sup>9</sup> 23 Div. Sitrep, 16 June.



Pantha on the Chindwin river, were known to have been vacated by them, and on 26 June, Sittaung was also reported unoccupied.<sup>10</sup> Thus by the end of June, practically all Japanese forces on the east bank of the Chindwin from Kalewa to Homalin had withdrawn and most of them were reported to have gone eastwards towards Indaw and Mandalay.<sup>11</sup> The traffic on the river had also ceased and it became evident that the idea of invading India had been, at least for the time being, given up by the Japanese. The reasons for this general withdrawal in this area were not clear but the following three possibilities may account for it:—

(i) The Japanese were unable to face the bombing by the Royal Air Force. In June, Homalin and the traffic on the river had been bombed from the air, and the Japanese had shown themselves “distinctly bomb-shy”. The river traffic had been largely disrupted and many refugees had escaped owing to the fact that their Japanese guards took to their heels at the approach of the Royal Air Force planes, leaving their prisoners to fend for themselves.

(ii) Perhaps the Japanese wished to employ all available forces to knock China out of the war, and knew that the Indo-British forces would not be able to start an offensive across the Chindwin.

(iii) The unhealthiness of the climate in the Chindwin area at this time of the year.

However, the Japanese own accounts give a different reason, namely that they did not wish to invade India as it was likely to arouse ill-feeling against the Japanese among the Indian masses.

The fact of the Japanese withdrawal, however, did not lull the Indian troops into a sense of security, and they continued to patrol and push forward their advanced positions, so that by the end of June they were dominating the jungle and the ‘no mans land’ up to the river.<sup>12</sup> Moreover these troops were strengthened by the arrival of the other brigades of the 23rd Indian Division as also by anti-aircraft and anti-tank artillery.

Another notable feature of the activities in the month of June was the improvement in the relations between the Indo-British troops and the local inhabitants. In May there had been some ‘incidents’ between the troops and the Nagas which had led to ill-feelings. Moreover, at that time the prestige of Japan was high in the eyes of the local people, some of whom were unwilling to co-operate with the ‘losing’ side. In fact some local and hostile Burmese actually signalled the movements of the Allied troops to the Japanese across

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 25 & 26 June.

<sup>11</sup> Resume of situation in the 23 Div. Area during the month of June 1942.

<sup>12</sup> Patrols and detachments had often to be supplied by air as the country was flooded and traffic by road was impossible. Wireless transmitters were also affected by the weather and in some cases news was brought to headquarters by swimmers.



the river by "yodelling".<sup>13</sup> But gradually, as a result of the Japanese failure to follow up the retreat of the Burma Army, and the appearance of the Royal Air Force planes in the sky, the attitude of the local population, both in the hills and in the Manipur plain, began to change. Another factor which probably led to the improvement of relations between the troops and the people was the fact that large amounts of money were being spent by the military which enabled the merchants to reap good profits.

After the withdrawal of the Japanese from Homalin and other places on the east bank of the Chindwin, the centre of interest on the river front shifted to Kalewa and Kalemmyo in July. From there the Japanese announced their intention of attacking the Chin Hills. They began to reinforce the Kalemmyo garrison with men, artillery, machine-guns and mules. Some bridging material was also brought in. Moreover, the Japanese issued some pamphlets to the local inhabitants in which the intention to attack the Chin Hills was declared. This had a bad effect on the morale of the Chin Levies who, despairing of any Allied support in the form of regular troops, and afraid of Japanese reprisals if they resisted, began to petition through their Chiefs for permission to return home. Meanwhile the Royal Air Force carried out heavy bombing and machine-gunning of Kalemmyo, and this probably had a salutary effect on the morale of the local population and the Levies.

Up to 10 July no Japanese attack had developed, but it was reported that Fort White and Falam were their first objectives. Kalemmyo to Fort White was an easy march of twenty-six miles though it entailed a climb of 6,000 feet and the crossing of numerous mountain streams on the way. Reinforcements for an expedition against Fort White could be sent from Kalewa. Falam was twenty-five miles south of Fort White. The report of a mixed Japanese force due at Gangaw on 5 July suggested that the advance on Falam was intended from that direction. Tiddim, which was in Allied hands, could also be threatened from Fort White.

To counter this threat the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered on 7 July to send a company of regular troops to Shuganu from where it was to move down to Mombi, to gain touch with "our forces" at Tiddim or "to find the enemy and keep him under constant observation, if he had meanwhile occupied Tiddim".<sup>14</sup>

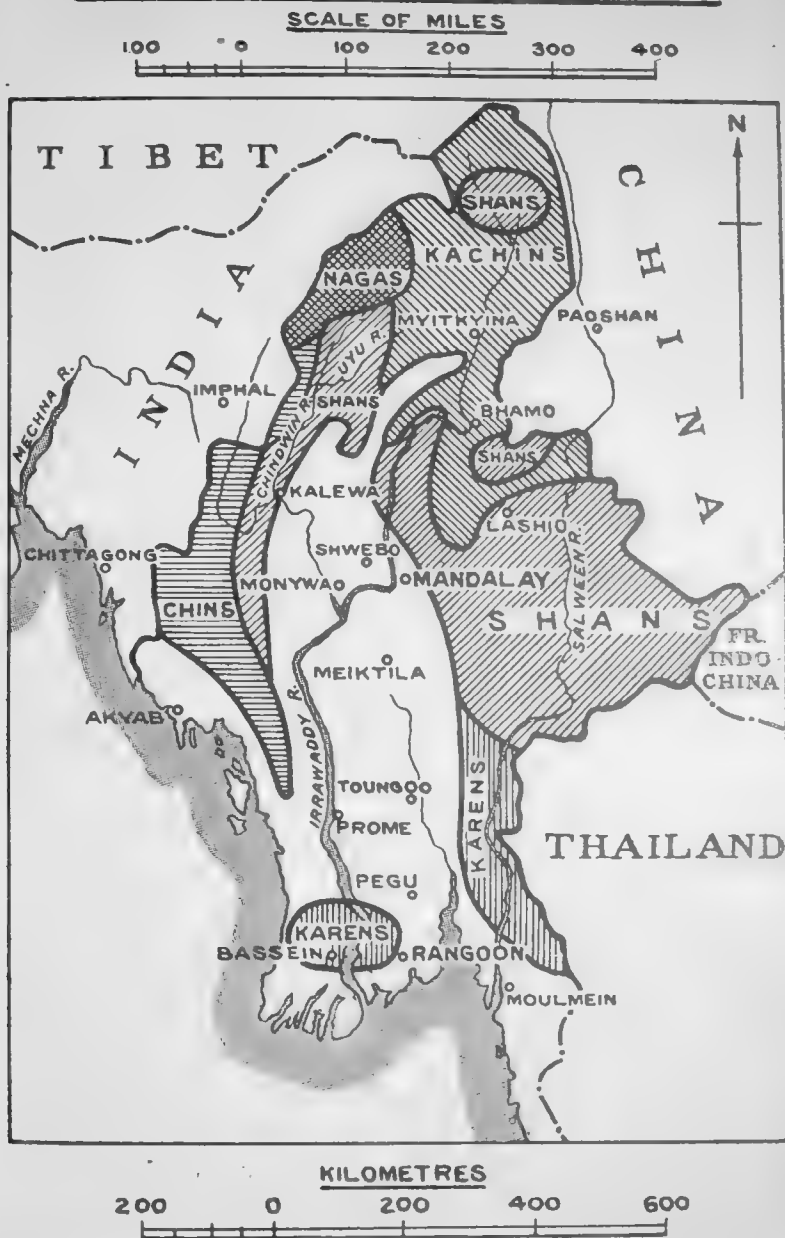
Meanwhile aerial activity over Kalemmyo was intensified and, on 7 July, Blenheims and Mohawks bombed and machine-gunned the town and the police lines several times, the Mohawks going as low as 100 feet to machine-gun from the air. Kalemmyo and other places

<sup>13</sup> See Sitreps for 3 June & 10 June, 23 Ind. Div. War Diary *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> 23 Indian Div. Op. Instn. No. 12.



# DISTRIBUTION OF THE HILL TRIBES OF BURMA





around and near it were again bombed and strafed on 8 July, when Mawlaik to the north and Gangaw to the south of Kalemmyo were also attacked.<sup>15</sup> While aerial activity continued on the following days also, the reconnaissance parties on the ground, sent out from Shuganu by the 4 Mahrattas found the tracks too difficult for mules and had to return without making any contact with the Japanese. However, by 18 July, a patrol of the 4 Mahrattas was established at Mombi, and a day after that event it was reported that the Japanese had left Kalemmyo and gone back to Kalewa.<sup>16</sup> Aerial activity was now shifted more towards Kalewa on which bombs and leaflets were dropped.<sup>17</sup> This show of air-strength helped to improve the morale of the Chin Hills population, and by 30 July 'V' Force reported that there were no Japanese in Kalewa or Gangaw valleys, but there were a few bands of armed Burmese. Thakins, traditionally anti-British, were also patrolling villages as far south as Natchaung on the Kalemmyo-Falam road recruiting villagers and collecting arms. In the town of Kalewa itself, anti-aircraft fire against the Royal Air Force planes became less intense and less accurate than before.

### *Japanese Inactivity*

Meanwhile, north of Kalewa the other brigades of the 23rd Indian Division did not meet any Japanese troops, either at Homalin or other places. It was clear that, with the exception of a garrison of anything up to a regiment at Kalewa, the Japanese had withdrawn from the Chindwin. Small garrisons of Burmese and Thakins, possibly stiffened by some Japanese troops, were left here and there, but no attempt was made by them during the monsoon to penetrate westward. Some activity was reported from the Myitkyina area, chiefly connected with the construction of an aerodrome at a place 30 miles south of Myitkyina, and increased activity on the Myitkyina aerodrome itself. There was, however, no evidence of any movement by Japanese land forces either towards Fort Hertz or into the Hukawng valley. The air reconnaissance of the main lines of communication in Burma did not reveal any great degree of activity or of haste to repair or improve facilities. No Japanese air opposition was encountered for some time by the Royal Air Force over Burma. It was believed that the Japanese air forces in the country were weaker than they had ever been. This alone suggested that no offensive operations were intended, at any rate until after the monsoon.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Situation & Operational Intelligence Reports 23 Div. War Diary.

<sup>16</sup> Operation Intelligence Summaries for 18 July and 20 July in 23 Div. War Diaries.

<sup>17</sup> Operation Intelligence Summaries, 23 July.

<sup>18</sup> WIS 30 July.



*Activity on the Indian Side*

All this while, the Indian and British troops in this area carried out long range patrolling and continued building up defensive positions. In addition, these troops and the authorities were faced with some other problems, some of which may be briefly mentioned here.

*Refugees.* First of all there was the problem of the refugees. Soon after the invasion of the Tenasserim districts of Burma by the Japanese forces in December 1941, many Indians had left the country by sea for Calcutta and Chittagong. When dock facilities and obtaining a passage by sea became impossible, some Indians had left southern Burma by the coastal belt between the mountains and the sea and had entered India *via* Cox's Bazar and Chittagong, after suffering great hardships on the way. But the real big exodus of Indians and certain other non-Burmese on foot began after the fall of Rangoon early in March 1942, and continued passing through unknown tracks into Assam up to the end of June, though a few came even in July. It is not proposed to recount here the hardships which these refugees suffered while passing through an unfriendly country. It will suffice to say that many died on the way of sickness and starvation, and those that managed to reach India were also famished and in an extremely poor state of physical and mental health. They entered India from different gaps and passes in the hills on the eastern frontier of Assam, but the most popular route chosen by them was through Tamu from where they went to Imphal *via* Palel. From Imphal they were taken to Dimapur where a camp had been established to look after them and send them to their various destinations in India. There were relief camps in other places also, and it was estimated that the following numbers had passed through the Dimapur camp alone:<sup>19</sup>

February	7,000
March	25,000
April	36,000
May	51,000
June	28,000
July	1,000

It will be seen that the largest number of refugees came in May, during which month the Burma Army withdrew to India *via* Assam and other forces reached Assam from India. One effect of this coincidence was the very great strain placed on the meagre transportation services, which more or less broke down. Not only had men to be moved into and out of Assam, but food and other supplies were required for the retreating Burma Army, for the 23rd Indian Division as also for the refugees. There are many instances recorded

<sup>19</sup> Figures taken from G. Tyson's book, *The Forgotten Frontier*, p. 50.



in the war diaries of the 23rd Indian Division of the troops sharing their rations with, or completely giving them up to the refugees. The army authorities co-operated whole-heartedly with the civil authorities in organising relief for the refugees and in giving whatever help they could, at a time when the danger of the Japanese invading India was at its highest.

A refugee control post was organised at Wangjing and another at Yaingangpokpi.<sup>20</sup> In addition a detachment of the 2nd Assam Rifles was placed at the disposal of the civilian refugee organisation to assist in the final evacuation of refugees from the Pungsan pass in north Assam.<sup>21</sup> These are only a few instances ; but actually help was given in every possible way.

*Morale.* The sorry plight of the refugees had an adverse effect not only on the morale of some of the Allied troops but also on the population of the Naga and Chin Hills. The morale of the troops was, on the whole, fair, but the passage of the retreating Burma Army and the refugees through the positions held by the 23rd Indian Division undoubtedly had its effect on morale and so had the bombing of Imphal.<sup>22</sup>

Another factor which had its effect on morale was the failure of the postal arrangements. The army's own system had not yet started working and the civil one had broken down. No stamps were purchasable in the Palel-Imphal area and the post office at Dimapur refused to accept unstamped letters.

Cholera had also broken out among the refugees, "and men, women and children with running smallpox sores and cholera, still trying to struggle along the roads, were a common sight".<sup>23</sup> The condition of the refugees had reached such a pitiful state in May that "the roads were literally strewn with corpses of those who had died from sheer exhaustion and starvation".<sup>24</sup> Such sights were not likely to improve morale, and it is not to be wondered that there were about 250 desertions by 19 May, most of which were from the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>25</sup> The army did everything to alleviate the sufferings of the refugees by giving food, medicines and lorries for evacuation but its resources were limited and could not cope adequately with the situation without interfering with its operational role. It had also established a refugee camp at Thoubal where refugees were collected, given medical attention, food and rest and then sent on to Silchar *via* Bishenpur. By the end of July,

<sup>20</sup> IV Corps War Diary for 11 and 15 June 1942.

<sup>21</sup> Appendix to IV Corps War Diary for June 1942.

<sup>22</sup> Maj.-Gen. R. A. Savory's notes for Commander, IV Corps, 18 May 1942, War Diary 23 Div.

<sup>23</sup> Appendix to 23 Indian Div. War Diary for May 1942.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> 23 Ind. Div. Sitrep, 19 May.



however, the refugee problem was over, supplies for the troops were coming in more regularly, the Royal Air Force had bombed Kalewa, Kalemyo and other Japanese positions and morale was again high. In the Chin Hills also the morale of the Levies and the civilian population was restored to some extent by the appearance of the Allied planes in the sky and by psychological warfare to counter the Japanese propaganda.

*Propaganda.* The Japanese propaganda in Assam took various forms, but the theme was always based on one underlying idea, namely, anti-colonialism and freedom for all races, which was expressed in their slogan "Asia for Asiatics". Their treatment of Indian refugees and prisoners was milder than that meted out to any Whites who fell into their hands.<sup>26</sup> Although Indian refugees were searched, and in many cases their meagre belongings were taken from them, they were allowed to proceed to India. Some civilians were released on the condition that on reaching India they should preach that "all Asiatics belong to one family".<sup>27</sup> To the Muslims of northern Arakan, they promised Pakistan; to the Burmese, "Burma for Burmese"; and earlier to the retreating Indian troops of the Burma Army they had promised safety and the way back to India.<sup>28</sup> To the Chins they said that they would drive out the British. But it seems the Chins did not believe either the British or the Japanese. As one of them later put it, "the villagers do not know what to believe as both the Japanese and the British are lying. The Government drop leaflets on the villages saying the British are coming but they never arrive, while the Japanese are always saying that they will drive the British out of the hills and never do".<sup>29</sup> Action, therefore, was the only thing that could convince the tribesmen and that was exactly what neither party was willing or able to take during the rainy season. The Japanese were content to hold the Chindwin line with outposts to cover the improvements which they were making in their defences in the 'back areas', while the Allies were busy improving and perfecting their supply arrangements and anti-malarial measures. It was however expected that the Japanese would attempt an invasion of India after the monsoon.

<sup>26</sup> Appendix A to IV Corps Intelligence Summary No. 3, June 1942.

<sup>27</sup> IV Corps Intelligence Summary Nos. 3, 4 & 8.

<sup>28</sup> "To our Indian soldiers. You are now completely surrounded by the Japanese Army together with the British Army. You have lost your way back to India. In India the opportunities to get freedom have arrived and the Indians rush to concentrate and sacrifice themselves with the movement bravely. Now it is not the time for you to do this work of resistance against your friend. Come and surrender yourself to the Japanese Army. The Japanese Army will safely protect you and will give you the way back to India". Appx. 52 War Diary of 23 Ind. Div. for June 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 95, 23 Indian Division War Diary April 1943.



*Allied Preparations*

Meanwhile, the Allied forces continued to make preparations and strengthen their position in Assam in every possible way to meet the expected invasion. These preparations fell under the following main heads:—

- (1) Increasing the number of troops, both regular and "irregular",
- (2) Training,
- (3) Improvement of roads, communication and defences,
- (4) Enlisting the support of Nagas, Chins and other local tribes and raising their morale,
- (5) Patrol activity.

A few lines about the gradual increase in the number of Allied troops in this area will not be out of place here.

As remarked earlier, in the beginning of May there was only the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division in Assam, which had occupied the Shenam position and had sent out patrols towards the Chindwin. From 11 May, the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade also began to arrive and its units were ordered to guard some of the approaches to the Imphal plain. This brigade consisted of 5/6 Raj Rif and 2/19 Hyderabad Regiment, but Kalibahadur and Shere Regiments were also put under its command. Towards the end of May, when the Japanese thrust from Homalin was expected, this brigade was ordered to deploy its troops in that direction and meet the thrust.<sup>30</sup> The 37th Indian Infantry Brigade, the last brigade of the 23rd Indian Division, arrived in the middle of June 1942 and was composed of 3/3 Gurkha Rifles, 3/5 Gurkha Rifles and 3/10 Gurkha Rifles. It was ordered to man the line Ukhrul—Litan—Yaingangpokpi—Imphal and to dominate the country between its forward posts and the Chindwin.<sup>31</sup> It was further told that "if the enemy advances in such superior force that your forward troops in the Ukhrul area cannot deal with him, he will be lured on so that he can be defeated in the area Litan—Yaingangpokpi".<sup>32</sup>

The 17th Indian Division had retreated from Burma and by the end of May was in Imphal, but it was too tired after its long march of over 1000 miles from Moulmein to Imphal, and about 25 per cent of its men were down with malaria. The 16th Indian Infantry Brigade of this division and various other units left it for rest and reorganisation, but the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was operating in June 1942 at Kohima and was responsible for protecting the lines of communication and watching the tracks from the Naga Hills.

<sup>30</sup> Sitrep 23 Ind. Div. 28 May.

<sup>31</sup> 23 Div. Op. No. 10, 18 June.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



By the end of June, therefore, the various brigades were located as under:—

Divisional troops of the 23rd Indian Division were on the Imphal—Palel road between miles 5 and 6.

The 1st Indian Infantry Brigade held the Shenam area.

The 37th Indian Infantry Brigade was at Imphal, Yaingangpokpi and Ukhrul.

The 49th Indian Infantry Brigade was at Palel and Shuganu.

The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 17th Indian Division was at Kohima.

In addition to these regular troops there were men of the "V" Force and the Assam Rifles. Both these organisations were semi-military in character and were for all purposes under the command of the IV Corps.<sup>33</sup>

"V" Force was originally meant for organising the tribes on the borders of Assam. The hill tracts of Assam were divided into five areas and the tribes within those areas were to be organised under the direction of the Brigadier-in-Charge of Guerillas who was at that time stationed in Jorhat. Each of the five areas was given to one officer who was to enter his sector and recruit guerillas. He was to arm those who were considered desirable for this purpose, and train selected men in demolition and various forms of sabotage, and others in observation and collection of information. The two objects for the creation of "V" Force were:<sup>34</sup>

- (a) The collection of information,
- (b) Harassing the Japanese, should they cross the border, and generally making the country inhospitable to them.

The Assam Rifles were a military police force originally under the civil government of Assam which exercised control over them through the Commander of the Assam District who was ex-officio Superintendent of the force, which was organised in platoons and located at various stations in eastern Assam. They were administered by civilian methods and organised, equipped, trained and employed in accordance with their own charter. Their work consisted, in the main, of assisting the civil police in the control of the more inaccessible hill areas. They were consequently not trained as regular troops and operated in many widely dispersed independent parties.

Although suitable in peace, this method did not prove practicable in war, and the Assam Rifles were brought wholly under army control in 1942 and given some military training. The IV Corps front had been divided into four operational commands<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> IV Corps Op. Instn. No. 20, 7 June 1942.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*



to each of which an appropriate allotment of Assam Rifles battalions and "V" Force guerillas was made. The operational commanders in these areas were made responsible for co-ordinating the activities of "V" Force and Assam Rifles for the common purpose. The Assam Rifles were primarily to be employed in support of "V" Force and in maintaining order within their areas.<sup>36</sup>

#### AFTER THE MONSOON

It was expected that after the monsoon of 1942 the Japanese would attempt an invasion of India. Actually however, apart from a few skirmishes here and there, and a Japanese raid at Siyin, six miles west of Kalemmyo, there was no serious fighting worth recording. On the other hand, in the beginning of 1943, Wingate's men invaded the Japanese held territory and successfully disrupted the Japanese lines of communication in Central Burma.<sup>37</sup> As the Japanese were devoting their attention to the unexpected attack by Wingate's men their activities on the Chindwin front decreased considerably. Patrol clashes continued to occur here and there and particularly in the Kalemmyo area as also in the northern sector in the Sumprabum road area. In the Kalemmyo area the Japanese carried out a daring raid at Siyin on the Kalewa—Fort White road with the help of Thakin guides towards the end of October 1942.<sup>38</sup> Nothing of importance however resulted from it as the Japanese just came, took a few Chin and Indian prisoners and then left. The prisoners were later released by them.<sup>39</sup> Japanese were also reported to be making defensive preparations in the Kalemmyo-Kalewa area and behind their forward positions in this sector. In the northern sector around the Sumprabum road the Kachin Levies had some small clashes with the Japanese in December 1942 and January 1943 but no major operations developed.

All this while, troops of the 23rd Indian Division were watching the central sector of the Chindwin front where, in the beginning of 1943, their main activities were concerned with aiding the Chindits (Wingate's troops) to launch their first expedition and, later, in helping them to return to India.

The heroic and thrilling deeds of Wingate's first expedition form the subject matter of some subsequent chapters; in this chapter only those activities of the Indian and British troops will be briefly noticed which were connected with the launching of Wingate's first expedition and the reception of the Chindits when they returned.

<sup>36</sup> IV Corps Op. Instrn. No. 12.

<sup>37</sup> For detailed method of co-ordinating the activities of these two forces see IV Corps. Op. Instrn. No. 21 of 29 June.

<sup>38</sup> See chapters V to VIII for a detailed account.

<sup>39</sup> WIS No. 53 dated 6 November 1942, War Diary, 23 Ind. Div.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



*Activities in Aid of Chindits*

In the beginning of 1943, the activities of the 23rd Indian Division in Assam in aid of Wingate's men consisted mainly in pushing and repairing roads upto the Chindwin for the use of the first Wingate expedition and of protecting the crossing places. Tonhe and Auktaung on the Chindwin had been selected as the crossing sites for Wingate's forces, and it was decided that the 23rd Indian Division should not only construct, repair and guard the routes to the places but should also stage a feint attack to the south of these places, down the Kabaw valley, to draw the Japanese attention away from the Chindits. Accordingly, during January 1943, more troops were moved to the Kabaw valley and patrols sent southwards and eastwards. The task of the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade, which was ordered to move to the Kabaw valley on 22 January, was<sup>40</sup>

- (a) to dominate the country up to the Chindwin between Yuwa and Tonhe and to allow no enemy across,
- (b) to protect work on the Sittaung road, and
- (c) to do reconnaissance across the river Chindwin.

It will be noted that perhaps for the first time after the retreat in the middle of 1942, the Indian troops were being ordered to go across to the east of the river Chindwin for reconnaissance.

In the north, in the Sangshak area, 3/3 GR (of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade) was given the task of dealing with any Japanese advance from Homalin.<sup>41</sup> In the central sector north of the Yu river, was the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade, and to the south was the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>42</sup> Simultaneously with these preparations and movements of troops, work on all important roads was continued with greater zeal.

In pursuance of the above instructions reconnaissance patrols were sent in various directions, and also across the Chindwin. Although these patrols brought back news of some Japanese movements to the east of the river, it was noticed with surprise that the Japanese patrols showed certain very un-Japanese characteristics. Firstly, they showed a strong lack of aggressive spirit. The clashes were few and the Japanese put up no serious resistance. Secondly, the Japanese patrols were reported to be armed with rifles only in marked contrast to all previous reports that they were heavily armed with automatic weapons.

The Indian patrols went to Paungbyin,<sup>43</sup> Mawku above Mawlaik, and a party of the Rajputana Rifles penetrated into the Japanese held territory almost within one mile of Indaw.<sup>44</sup> The 49th Indian

<sup>40</sup> 23rd Indian Div. Op. Instrn. No. 37, 15 Jan. 1943.

<sup>41</sup> Op. Instrn. No. 36.

<sup>42</sup> 23 Div. War Diary, 17 January 1943.

<sup>43</sup> On 12 January 1943. See 23 Div. Instrn. No. 135.

<sup>44</sup> 23 Div. W.D., 6 Feb. 43. The Raj Rif patrol returned on 6 Feb. 43.



Infantry Brigade patrols reported on 16 January that Sittaung was clear of the Japanese, and the next day Yuwa was also found unoccupied.<sup>45</sup> Tonhe and Thaungdut were entered on 18 January and also found clear.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, the Japanese were supposed to be strong in the southern sector around Kalemmyo, and this is exactly what the Allies wished at that time. As the time for Wingate and his men to cross over drew near (they were to cross in the second week of February) the patrolling by Indian troops became more aggressive and intense. Patrols went as far afield as Yuwa and Ta-Nga with the object of directing the Japanese attention to the south in order to cover the move of Wingate's men.<sup>47</sup> The ruse was successful and the 'Longcloth' column (another name for Wingate's columns) came to the area on 11 February and vanished across the river on 14 and 15 February without the Japanese having got even the slightest hint of it. In some cases men of the 23rd Indian Division escorted them 20 miles beyond the Chindwin.

### *Diversiory Moves*

Meanwhile the patrols sent out by the 23rd Indian Division had minor clashes with the Japanese parties. A patrol of the 4 Mahratta Light Infantry visited Mawku and was fired upon by the Japanese on 12 February. This visit of the Mahrattas was designed to give the impression that Mawlaik was threatened.<sup>48</sup> When the Mahrattas returned the fire the Japanese withdrew into the jungle.<sup>49</sup> A patrol of 1 Assam raided the village of Minya and captured a pro-Japanese agent called San Doka.<sup>50</sup> On the night of 16/17 February, the 4/5 Mahratta Light Infantry was again involved in an exchange of fire with the Japanese troops at Okkan near Kalemmyo, in which both sides suffered casualties. This attack of the 4th Mahratta Light Infantry on Okkan, after a swift advance down the Kabaw valley was another feint, and a bigger one, to give the impression of a pending attack on Kalemmyo, which was only about 20 miles from Okkan. The intention of the Mahratta battalion was to stop for the night of 16/17 February at Okkan and move towards Kantha and Kalemmyo on the 17th. A patrol was sent towards Kantha during the night at 2300 hours to reconnoitre for the movement next morning. The patrol reached Kantha but on its return journey was fired upon by the Japanese from Kyetpanet area.<sup>51</sup> Shots were

<sup>45</sup> 23 Div. Instn. No. 134.

<sup>46</sup> 23 Div. W.D. for 24 January.

<sup>47</sup> Summary of events and information for the week ended 21 February 1943, 23 Div. W.D.

<sup>48</sup> 23 Div. Op. Instn. No. 42.

<sup>49</sup> Summary of events and information, 21 Feb. *Op. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> 23 Div. War Diary, Summary of events and information for the week ending 21 February.



exchanged and the patrol withdrew. The Japanese, however, were not content with this and moved towards Okkan where the Mahratta battalion was harbouring. At 0400 hours one company of the Japanese made a desperate attack on the Mahratta position with bayonets, under cover of mortar and light machine-gun fire. The Mahrattas opened fire at point-blank range and repulsed the attack. At dawn they launched a counter-attack, but the Japanese had withdrawn to the south by that time and no contact was made. The Japanese had taken their wounded and dead with them for no corpses were found on the "battlefield". From the pools of blood it was estimated that they had suffered between 30 to 40 casualties, the Mahratta casualties being two killed and 7 or 8 wounded.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, the Chindits continued moving fast further east into the territory occupied by the Japanese.

### *Return of the Chindits*

After the Chindits had moved across the Chindwin there was comparative quiet on this river front as the Japanese were busy elsewhere, trying to do what they could against the unexpected attack of the Chindits during the month of March.<sup>53</sup> Towards the beginning of April, however, the Japanese had realised that they (the Chindits) could return to India across the Chindwin only and so they strengthened their positions on that river, particularly in the area between Mawlaik and Thaungdut.<sup>54</sup> On the Indian side the policy was to establish reception camps on the west bank of the river and to divert the attention of the Japanese on the east bank to enable the returning Chindits to cross the river and escape into the Indian territory. In the words of Lt. Col. A. J. F. Doulton:<sup>55</sup>

"the result during April was that the ground between Tabaw and Sittaung on the east bank of the river became for about thirty miles inland a vast No Man's Land where there was a melee of Japs trying to intercept the Wingate force, ourselves trying to distract the Japs and Wingate's men trying to reach safety."

However, most of the Chindits, tired and exhausted though they were, were able to come back safely by the end of April as a result of the activities of the various units of the 1st and 49th Indian Infantry Brigades. The policy to be followed by these units was

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> "Lack of Jap patrol activity is very possibly due to Longcloth's activities further East". 23 Div. War Diary, 7 March.

<sup>54</sup> In fact about 140 men of Wingate's southern column had crossed back at Auktaung and Tonhe on 9 and 10 March. See 23 Div. Op. Instn. No. 47 of 12 March 1943.

<sup>55</sup> *The Fighting Cock*, p. 54.



laid down by the IV Corps in its instructions to the 23rd Indian Division as under:<sup>56</sup>

"It is essential that your operation should be accurately timed to prevent the Jap garrison at Pinlebu from concentrating against Longcloth and to distract as far as possible the attention of the Jap forces at Pinbon at the period when Longcloth forces are approaching the area of those places."

In order to operate in the direction of Pinlebu and Pinbon with a view to helping the activities of the Chindits and covering their retreat, patrol bases were established in the area of Kaungkasi and Wetauk from where patrols could be sent out towards Pinlebu and Pinbon. 1 Patiala and 1 Seaforth were assigned the task which they carried out admirably upto 13 April, after which the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade, which had so far been building roads on the west bank, took over the area to the east of the river. All Indian units in the area and the Seaforth had many minor clashes with the Japanese upto 15 May, but the constant patrolling and sudden attacks on the Japanese patrols in the jungle successfully diverted the Japanese attention from the 'Longcloth' columns.

Meanwhile, the Japanese had shown some aerial activity after a long time and bombed Imphal twice on 20 and 21 April.<sup>57</sup> When the rains began in May, the Pael-Tamu fair-weather road was rendered unusable, and it was decided to withdraw the troops from the front to the Imphal plain before the monsoon. But it was rumoured that a strong Japanese force was preparing to cross the Chindwin, and although the rumour was proved baseless, the plan of withdrawal had to be postponed for a while. As fresh troops came from India, a gradual withdrawal was made and troops of the 23rd Indian Division, which had been in the Kabaw valley and other malarial regions for a long period, were finally concentrated in the Imphal plain by the end of July for rest. Patrol activity on a reduced scale continued even during the monsoon, and in this the Allies definitely showed themselves as far superior to and more successful than the Japanese. The result was the general control by the Allies of the No Man's Land, which had an excellent and heartening effect on morale. The work done by the Allied patrols in appalling weather over a difficult country was advantageous in every respect.<sup>58</sup>

As the 23rd Indian Division was withdrawing to the Imphal plain, news was received that the 17th Indian Division was being hard pressed in the Chin Hills. Two of its brigades were already there but there were no reserves. The Japanese were, however,

<sup>56</sup> IV Corps Op. Instrn. No. 45, 1 April 1943. See also 23 Div. OO No. 1 of 30 March 1943, and IV Corps OO No. 3 of 17 April.

<sup>57</sup> IV Corps report on bombing of Imphal.

<sup>58</sup> WIS No. 97 dated 10 September 1943.



building up their strength in Kalembo and it was expected that they would make a serious attempt to capture the whole Chin Hills area after the monsoon. A battalion (1/16 Punjab) which was comparatively a fresh unit of the 23rd Indian Division was selected, in October 1943, to go to the assistance of the 17th Indian Division in the Chin Hills and foil the Japanese attempt. This will be narrated in the chapter following.



## CHAPTER IV

# Chin Hills Operations

When the Japanese occupied Burma, the Chin Hills area was the only part of the country which remained in British hands, where the Chin Levies proved a real menace to the Japanese. Situated along the eastern border of India, this hilly tract had no roads worth the name. Transport was primitive and inadequate for a modern campaign. The staple diet of the population was rice, for which the area depended mainly on the Burma plains. With the loss of Burma to the Japanese, there was acute shortage of food. Manpower resources were also extremely small owing to heavy recruitment. Rainfall is heavy, about 80" in the year while at Lungleh it is 130".

After May 1942, Indian troops, particularly fresh ones, were sent to the Chin Hills from time to time. These groups were expected to get training and experience of mountain and jungle warfare, and at the same time bolster up the morale of the Chin Levies, neutralise their sense of isolation and harass the Japanese lines of communication. These detachments had to march over high hills, sometimes at a height of 8000 feet or more above sea-level and through dense forests.

During the rainy season of 1942 the Japanese, who were in occupation of Kalewa and Kalembo, showed great interest in the Chin Hills and were supposed to be increasing their garrisons in these places and making other warlike preparations. To meet this threat the number of irregular forces in the Chin Hills was increased. By October 1942, the 17th Indian Division had been reorganised after its retreat earlier in the spring and was ready to fight again. Detachments of this division were sent in October-November 1942 to the Chin Hills to meet the growing Japanese threat. In addition, the construction of a motor road to Tiddim, fit for use by heavy vehicles, was taken in hand. In December a company of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles (of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 17th Indian Division) was ordered to operate on the main road connecting Kalembo to Tiddim and Falam and to support the Chin Levies. This company immediately came into contact with the Japanese. Constant patrol clashes between its platoons and the Japanese soon became a regular feature and continued for the following three months. In March 1943, by which time other companies of the battalion (2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles) had also come up, a party of 200 to 300



Japanese troops made a determined attempt to oust the Indian troops from the area, but the attack was repulsed.

### *Operation "Navy"*

By March 1943 the road from Imphal to Tiddim, to a large extent, had been completed—only one difficult stretch of 26 miles, from MS 100 to MS 126, full of rocky surface and steep sides, remained to be constructed. As bull-dozers could not be used on this stretch on account of the steepness of the rocks, it was expected that it would take at least two months to finish. Just then, however, the Japanese concentration began to take place to the south-east of the Chin Hills, and it became necessary to complete the road more expeditiously. Moreover, on account of the difficulties of dropping supplies in this area it was necessary to maintain the battalion at Tiddim by mules—a slow affair—and this further increased the urgency of completing the road as early as possible. In the middle of March, therefore, a special scheme called operation "Navy" was launched for completing the road, and the work was started in right earnest. A body of 4500 troops with only their personal arms and equipment was employed on the road. The operation was a most difficult one, but in spite of early rains and mud it was pushed through. "Only the best drivers could be used and they worked night and day."<sup>1</sup> The road was pushed to the Manipur river ahead of schedule, and by the end of April jeeps began to ply over a pontoon bridge on the river, and the battalion at Tiddim was supplied by jeeps instead of by mules.<sup>2</sup> In this strenuous work 1/4 GR and 1/7 GR had also taken part especially from MS 104 to the Manipur river, while the construction from the left bank of the river to Tiddim was mainly the work of Chin labour. From Tiddim onwards a track just fit enough for jeeps was also opened to Fort White and No. 3 Stockade on the Tiddim-Kalemyo route.

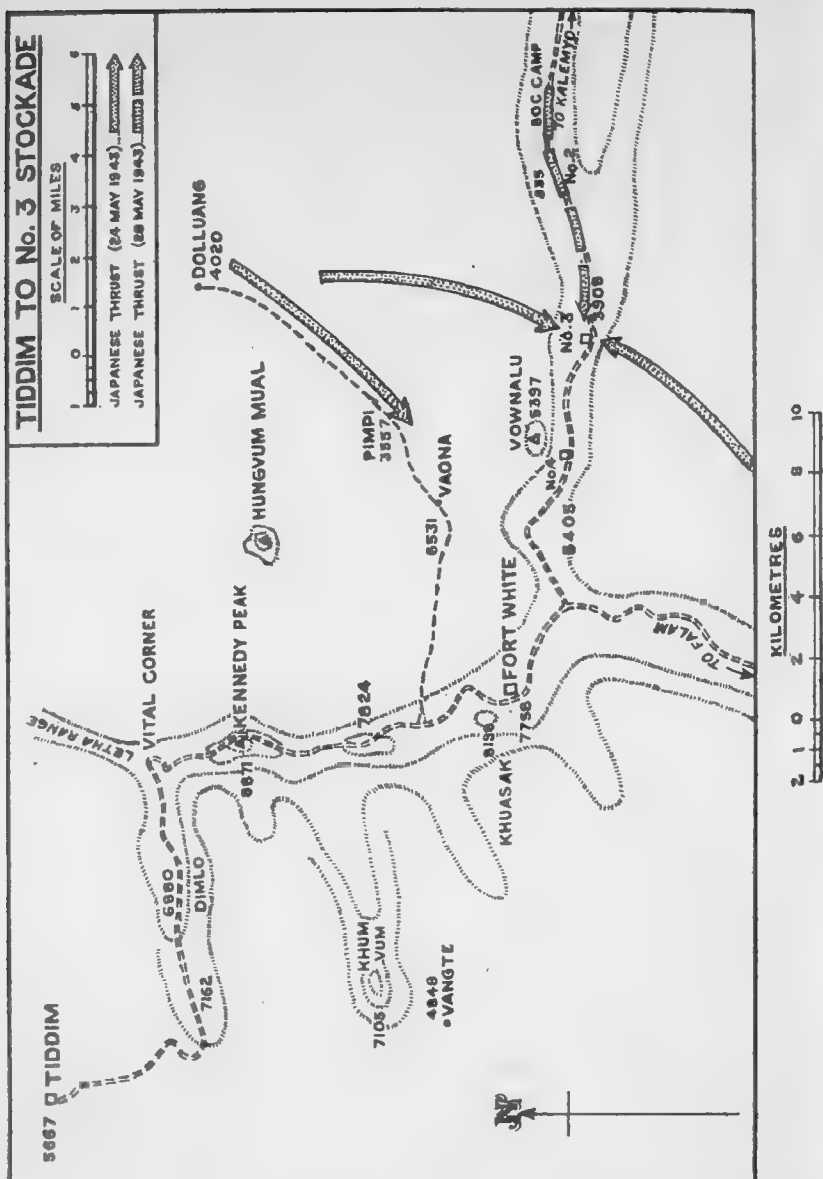
### *Japanese Advance Begins*

It was decided that the road-making battalions should be withdrawn in the first week of May to Shillong for rest. But towards the end of April a party of Japanese, estimated at five platoons, entered the Chin Hills near Dolluang and penetrated as far as Tuisau. The Chin Levies withdrew as the Japanese advanced and did not oppose them. The 2/5 RGR therefore sent its B Company to go after the Japanese and drive them back. The B Company failed to contact them as the Japanese had already withdrawn, taking some hostages with them. The latter were however released and returned to their

<sup>1</sup> *History of the 17 Indian Division*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*







villages.<sup>3</sup> With a view to check any further Japanese incursion of this type, B Company set up at Dolluang. The rest of the 2/5 RGR was located as follows:—

- Battalion Headquarters at Tiddim,
- A & C Companies at No. 3 Stockade,
- D Company (in reserve) at Tiddim.

In addition, some piquets and levies were stationed at No. 2 Stockade.

This incursion by the Japanese and their quick withdrawal, was, however, in the nature of an exploratory raid and they soon followed it up with a full-scale attempt at a complete occupation of the Chin Hills. Before, however, the fighting resulting from that attempt and its failure are narrated, it is necessary to describe briefly the topography of the area.

### *Topography*

A long ridge runs down from Fort White to No. 3 Stockade and Kennedy Peak, the latter being 9000 feet high. The distance between Fort White and No. 3 Stockade is nine miles. The upper half of this ridge was covered with dense leech-infested jungle. In the lower regions, the jungle gradually changed to the dry variety of stunted trees and comparatively little undergrowth. East of the Stockade there was scrub which gradually merged into the thick, teak forest of the Kalemmyo plain. The spur on which No. 3 Stockade was situated had precipitous slopes both on the north and south sides throughout its length. Because of these slopes it was not possible to manoeuvre troops except on the crest of the spur itself.<sup>4</sup>

Just west of No. 3 Stockade was a knife-edged hill named Basha Hill, which dominated the No. 3 Stockade to such an extent that it must be taken before any advance could be made to the Stockade from that side. It was some 700 yards long, from east to west, and from it ran three other ridges more or less in a southerly direction. One that ran from its western end was called Basha West; the one from the eastern end, Basha East; and the central one, Basha Centre. South of Basha East, the hill ran down to a plateau in the basin of which lay the bashas of No. 3 Stockade. Eastwards again the ground rose on a spur leading to Theizang village, the summit of the rise being known as the Lone Tree Hill, east of which was another long ridge—the Mualpi. It will thus be seen that the eastern slopes of Basha Hill were in full view of No. 3 Stockade and a large part of the Mualpi ridge.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Report of Operations in the Chin Hills, May 1943, by Comd. 48 Indian Infantry Brigade.

<sup>4</sup> *History of the 17 Indian Division*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Operations—Chin Hills, 17th Indian Division, File 8775.



### *Reasons for Japanese Activity*

Various explanations were put forth at that time for the likely reasons and aims which the Japanese had for launching an attack in this area in May 1943. But Major-General D. T. Cowan, Commander of the 17th Indian Division, was of the opinion that the Japanese "intended nothing less than the complete occupation of the Chin Hills".<sup>6</sup> Two other possible motives suggested were:—

- (1) Firstly, that the Japanese intelligence in regard to the Chin Hills was poor as they had not pushed forward any patrols there. They were apprehensive of British intentions since any British advance would constitute a threat to their defences in the Kalemmyo—Kale Valley. The Japanese therefore wanted to test the British strength in this area and obtain information regarding the Tiddim Road.
- (2) Secondly, that the Japanese desired to establish a force in the comparatively non-malarial area of the Tiddim hills. This would enable them to keep a closer watch on the Indian and British movements in the Chin Hills and hamper their preparations for a forward move, in addition to allowing the Japanese to reduce their forces in the malarial area of Kalewa-Kalemmyo to a minimum.<sup>7</sup> The Japanese accounts regarding this attempt are almost silent, and they simply mention that the 33rd Division with headquarters at Kalewa was to fortify the area and "to send a small detachment to establish a patrol base at the Stockade".<sup>8</sup>

### *Japanese Advance against No. 3 Stockade*

After the Japanese incursion into Dolluang, already described, the movement of Indian troops back to Shillong was stopped. Arms, food and other supplies were collected in the Tiddim area and the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade got ready to meet the next Japanese thrust. However, before the thrust came in the fourth week of May, many Indian troops were suffering from malaria, particularly in 1/7 GR which had sent 250 men to the hospital. Jeep and mule drivers and many men of 1/4 GR were also affected.

On 21 May, information was received at the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade Headquarters (then at M.S. 109) that 100 Japanese troops intended to attack No. 3 Stockade *via* No. 2 Stockade, the same night or on the night of 22/23 May. On this, a warning order

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Lt.-Gen. G. A. P. Scoones, Commander IV Corps dated 18 June 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Operational Summary No. 117, 23 Div. W.D., Part V.

<sup>8</sup> *SEATIC Historical Bulletin* No. 240, p. 2.



was issued to 1/4 GR to keep one company ready to move forward at one hour's notice to Tiddim to reinforce 2/5 RGR. Another company was put at two hours' notice. Offensive air reconnaissance was also carried out in the area west of Kalemyo.<sup>9</sup> On the evening of 22 May, five platoons of Japanese troops moved towards No. 2 Stockade driving the Chin Levies before them, and occupied the BOC Camp between MS 9 and MS 10 on the Kalemyo—Fort White Road. The Levies withdrew to No. 3 Stockade where two companies of 2/5 RGR were already in position.<sup>10</sup> At 1930 hours the Japanese opened up intensive fire on No. 2 Stockade, which was however quite empty by that time.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, a company of 1/4 GR which had been ordered to stand by in the brigade area at MS 109 left in jeeps for No. 3 Stockade and reached Tiddim in the early morning of 23 May. This day was a comparatively quiet one and when Mohawks of the Royal Air Force carried out a reconnaissance of the Kalemyo area they found nothing unusual at No. 2 Stockade.<sup>12</sup> Evidently, the Stockade abandoned by the Levies on the previous evening had not yet been occupied by the Japanese. At 1620 hours, however, the Japanese put down, for about half an hour, artillery and mortar fire on No. 2 Stockade as a preliminary to an attack on this abandoned position, and wasted considerable ammunition. Apart from the fruitless activity of the Japanese against No. 2 Stockade, the 23rd of May was quiet, so much so that 2/5 RGR sent a message to the brigade headquarters saying that they proposed to return the company of 1/4 GR on 24 May if there was no further Japanese movement.<sup>13</sup>

### *Fall of No 3 Stockade*

At dawn of 24 May, however, the attack on No. 3 Stockade began to develop, the first objective of the Japanese being the Signal Piquet, one mile north of the Stockade. Vital points around this ridge were manned by the Levies who "did not face the music; of their number only one subedar and three or four men remaining to see it out".<sup>14</sup> Soon therefore the attack on the Signal Piquet itself developed. The Japanese came on in wave after wave and were met by heavy fire from the solitary platoon of 2/5 RGR. The platoon could not hold on for long against heavy odds, and after some hand-to-hand fighting had to pull out at 0630 hours.<sup>15</sup> The Japanese had suffered heavy casualties, but they had captured

<sup>9</sup> IV Corps Sitrep 352 to 1800 hrs 21 May.

<sup>10</sup> Sitrep 354. *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Operations Chin Hills, 17 Indian Division, File 8775.

<sup>12</sup> IV Corps Sitrep No. 354. *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> War Diary, 48 Indian Infantry Brigade, 23 May.

<sup>14</sup> Report on Operations in the Chin Hills, File 8775.

<sup>15</sup> IV Corps War Diary gives the time as 0530 hours.



the Signal Piquet, and started shelling No. 3 Stockade and Theizang village from the direction of Tahan.

Meanwhile, in the Stockade itself, certain re-dispositions of troops were made to link up the Stockade with Basha Hill, and at the same time, to make a counter-attack to recapture the Signal Piquet.<sup>16</sup> The 2/5 RGR Commando Platoon and C Company (less one platoon) were selected for the counter-attack. The attack was launched and two lines of Japanese snipers between No. 3 Stockade and the Piquet were routed. It was then observed that a large number of Japanese troops, about 500, were forming up at the Piquet. To push the attack against that point would have led to failure and the attack was therefore halted. Meanwhile the Japanese swung in on the Stockade where the remaining platoon of C Company opened fire on them and held them up for a short time. But the garrison was badly outnumbered and was in danger of being overrun. The Stockade was therefore abandoned at 1407 hours on 24 May.

The troops were withdrawn from the No. 3 Stockade area and fell back upon the following dispositions after passing through Fort White at midnight of 24/25 May:—

Kennedy Peak	...	A skeleton battalion headquarters of 2/5 RGR and A and B Companies.
Dimlo	...	C Company of 2/5 RGR
Suangpi	...	C Company of 1/4 GR
Saizang	...	D Company of 2/5 RGR

The B Company of 2/5 RGR, which had been holding Dolluang since the beginning of May, had fallen back from Dolluang to Pimpi and the hill-top Point 5151, but there was no sign of the Japanese there at this time.

Meanwhile, orders were issued by the IV Corps to the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade Headquarters to move forward to Tiddim from MS 109 and take over command of the operations under direct orders of the Corps. The brigade was ordered "to destroy enemy force which has penetrated No. 3 area", using all available troops under its command.<sup>17</sup>

#### ATTEMPTS TO RECAPTURE NO 3 STOCKADE

The Japanese had not followed up the withdrawal, and in the morning of 25 May it was decided to reoccupy Fort White which was done without any opposition.<sup>18</sup> During the night of 25 May,

<sup>16</sup> A Company occupied the Clearing Hill, B Company was away at Dolluang, C Company was in No. 3, and D Company was at MS 18 as a lay back reserve.

<sup>17</sup> War Diary 48 Bde., 25 May 1943.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



the headquarters and the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade advance party of 1/7 GR also reached Tiddim and an attack on No. 3 Stockade was planned for the morning, to be led by 2/5 RGR. The first objective in this advance was naturally Basha Hill, without taking which no advance on No. 3 Stockade could be made.

### *First Attack on Basha Hill*

On the morning of 25 May the advance commenced as planned, at 0700 hours with A Company of 2/5 RGR in the lead. No Japanese opposition was encountered at Point 6045 and on the hill Vownalu, and the troops moved on towards Basha Hill, the west and centre points of which were also found clear. However, as the troops advanced towards Basha East, along the knife-edge summit, they were met by a sudden light-machine-gun and mortar fire at short range. The advance halted at MS 18, a fire plan was made and the forward company then made a dashing attack using Blitz tactics. But the Japanese were well dug-in, and directed heavy fire on the attackers who could make no appreciable progress. The Indian troops, nonetheless, held on to Basha Centre from where fire was exchanged with the Japanese. By the evening it became clear that the capture of Basha East would require a stiff fight the next day, and the troops retired for harbour.

There was no activity during the night of 26/27, but a request was made for a major air attack to take place on No. 3 Stockade on the morning of 27 May. The air attack, however, could not materialise on account of the airfield having become water-logged. The striking force waited till 12 noon for the planes to come, but was disappointed and decided to launch the attack unaided from the air. The plan was to capture No. 3 Stockade, but Basha East had to be captured first and repeated attacks were launched against this.

### *Second Attack on Basha Hill*

The attack on 27 May opened at 1245 hours with a barrage of 3" mortars for 10 minutes after which the troops moved forward towards Basha East. The Commando Platoon of 2/5 RGR was on the left and C Company of 2/5 RGR in the centre and right. The advance met with heavy Japanese fire from the Mualpi ridge, at the same place where it had been halted on the previous day. Undaunted by this, the troops moved on. The Commandos swept round the left shoulder of the hill and gained a good footing there. The C Company on the right moved on towards the east of the hill but again came under heavy light-machine-gun and mortar fire from the reverse slopes. The right C Company was thus forced to withdraw down the northern slopes of Basha



Hill and the other troops also withdrew to conform with this movement.

It was clear that the Japanese were very strong in fire power and it was not possible to capture Basha East with only two companies. Consequently a three company attack was planned to take place the same afternoon.

### *Third Attack on Basha Hill*

The plan was that D Company (less one platoon) would advance along the summit; lower down on the south side C Company of 1/4 GR would pass through to the left of Clearing Hill, and as soon as they had got on a little, B Company would turn southwards down the slopes of Clearing Hill and into No. 3 Stockade.

The attack began at 1435 hours and was launched with great determination and ferocity. What followed is described thus in a report.<sup>19</sup>

"D Coy 2/5 RGR had difficulty in getting on. Capt. Oldham, 1/4 GR with the left company, therefore, turned up the hill from the right. Walking straight into the attack, 1/4 and 2/5 men paid no attention to the enemy fire. Using bombs freely and firing LMGs, Tommy guns and rifles from the hip they overran the position. Japs who stayed were exterminated, others could not face the music and fled. Oldham had but 6 survivors of one platoon, but these forged ahead until once again the untouched guns and machine-guns on the reverse slopes called a halt to our advance. B Coy, 1/4 GR got further forward on the right, but they too were held up. The Japs launched counter-attacks, but these were beaten off and heavy casualties inflicted on them.

"Basha Hill was ours. All three company commanders had been wounded but Oldham and Dennys (D coy, 2/5 RGR), both wounded in the leg, stayed on to encourage their men. There were many instances of our men fighting on after being wounded. One outstanding case both of this, and of dauntless courage and determination, is Hav. Gaje Ghale, 2/5 RGR, who led his platoon across the bottleneck and won the position."

Havildar Gaje Ghale received the Victoria Cross later on and the citation is as follows:—

"Havildar Gaje Ghale commanded a platoon of young soldiers ordered to take part in an assault on a hill which was a key position of the enemy in the Chin Hills. The approach was along a knife-edged ridge with precipitous sides and bare of cover. While preparing to attack, the platoon came under heavy mortar fire but Havildar Gaje Ghale rallied his men and led them forward. In the

<sup>19</sup> File 601/8775/H.



heavy fire which met them, Gaje Ghale was wounded in the arm, chest and leg by a grenade but, regardless of these wounds and the intense fire, he led his men to close grips with the enemy and bitter hand-to-hand fighting ensued. Covered with blood from his neglected wounds he led assault after assault encouraging the platoon by shouting the Gurkha battle-cry, 'Ayo Gurkhali'. Spurred on by his example, the platoon stormed and carried the hill at heavy cost to the Japanese. Hav. Gaje Ghale refused to have his wounds dressed until ordered to the regimental aid post by an officer."

Basha East had been taken, but it was clear that the main defences of the Japanese behind the hill and in No. 3 Stockade were still very strong and would require unnecessary loss of men and ammunition if they were to be destroyed. As against three or four companies of the Indian troops, the Japanese had nearly 1000 men at No. 3 and another 1000 at No. 2 Stockade. Casualties among the Indian troops had been fairly heavy and ammunition was also running short. Another difficulty was the lack of drinking water. It was therefore decided not to attempt the capture of No. 3 Stockade or to hold Basha East. A careful withdrawal was therefore staged and Basha East abandoned. Though the position won after such hard fighting was given up, the attempt was not fruitless. The Japanese had received a hard and unexpected blow, and though they remained in occupation of No. 3 Stockade, they had to give up any idea of an offensive in the Chin Hills for a considerable time.

Proposals to retake No 3 Stockade with sufficient forces were, however, made soon afterwards. The IV Corps Commander, Lt.-Gen. G. A. P. Scoones, was in favour of this step both on tactical and political grounds. Politically, it was considered that to leave the Japanese undefeated in the Stockade area would have a bad effect on the Chins who "will not fight as they will be convinced we do not mean to fight".<sup>20</sup> Tactically also, the retention of Tiddim area and recapture of the lost Stockades was considered to be important "for any operations from Chin Hills area next autumn".<sup>21</sup> General Giffard, Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Army, however, did not agree with this view. Though he realised that the political effect of not launching another offensive on the morale of the Chins would be bad, he thought that it would be worse if "we had delivered an attack and had then to move back".<sup>22</sup> Tactically also he considered No. 3 Stockade "important but not vital". The main

<sup>20</sup> See correspondence between IV Corps, XV Corps and Eastern Army Headquarters, June 1943. File 601/8537/H.

<sup>21</sup> Telegram from IV Corps to Eastern Army. *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> General Giffard's letter to Lt.-Gen. G. A. P. Scoones, 15 June 1943. *Ibid.*



difficulty of course was that not more than one battalion could be maintained in that area during the monsoon, and one battalion was not considered sufficient to attack No. 3 Stockade successfully. The idea to recapture it during the rainy season was therefore given up and the troops fell back to their defensive positions,<sup>23</sup> but maintained contact with the Japanese through fighting patrols. In addition, bombing of No. 3 Stockade and other Japanese-held positions was carried out whenever the weather permitted. A few patrol clashes also occurred during the month of June between the Indian troops and Levies on the one side, and the Japanese on the other,<sup>24</sup> but the overall situation remained the same.

Meanwhile the Headquarters 17th Indian Division and the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade had left Shillong and reached MS 109. As it had been decided not to undertake any offensive operations during the monsoon, the divisional headquarters and the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade were sent back to Shillong and the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade took over this area. The supplies to the forward troops by air as well as by road were affected by bad weather and it was considered desirable to keep only one brigade in the Tiddim area. Fort White was in Allied hands and a small detachment was stationed at MS 100 to look after the hilly line of communication and keep the road open for supplies to reach. The jeep track on the Imphal-Tiddim Road was kept open throughout the rainy season, except for a short break.<sup>25</sup>

#### OPERATION "SMASHER"

In the beginning of August 1943 the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade carried out an operation called 'Smasher' against the Japanese positions in the area of Basha East and Signal Piquet, with the primary object of discovering Japanese strength and the dispositions of their troops. Other objects were to destroy a wooden bridge in the area of No. 2 Stockade for interrupting traffic between Kalemio and No. 3 Stockade, and to lay an ambush on the road between MS 8 and MS 9.<sup>26</sup> The raid was carried out by 1/10 GR and 1/3 GR, supported by a mountain battery, troops of the Chin Hills Battalion, the Levies and the Royal Air Force. While the main force was to raid the Japanese positions on Basha East, other troops were to create a diversion by moving against the Signal Piquet and Theizang village. Another party was to move towards the bridge

<sup>23</sup> The new positions were along the Dimlo ridge. RU 1683 covering Tiddim. 4 Corps Isum No. 53. 601/186/W.D., Part XIV.

<sup>24</sup> See 601/246/W.D. Part V, Operational Summary No. 124. Also Weekly Intelligence Summaries of IV Corps and 17 Indian Div. for June 1943.

<sup>25</sup> *History of the 17 Indian Division*, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Account based on Appendix J to IV Corps War Diary for August 43.



just east of No. 2 Stockade and destroy it and then to lay an ambush on the road connecting Kalembo with No. 3 Stockade.

The main force left Fort White on 6 August and reached Basha Centre with great difficulty early next morning, as visibility had diminished to less than one yard and many mules had fallen on the way. Meanwhile the diversionary force had approached Theizang and opened gun and mortar fire on the Japanese position north of the village, resulting in considerable confusion and shouting in the village and in the Japanese position, early in the morning of 7 August. This shouting could be heard by the main force at Basha Centre, which then put down concentrated heavy fire on Basha East, and then advanced along the north side of the ridge to the saddle between Basha Centre and Basha East. By 0720 hours the Japanese had started firing from No. 3 Stockade and Basha East. The column advancing towards Basha East on the saddle moved very slowly on account of occasional bursts of fire from Basha East and a lot of sniping and mortar fire from the reverse slopes. The column, however, found a deep overgrown nulla about 10 yards down the ridge and continued the advance along it. Still it was sniped at from the trees and fox-holes on the ridge. After advancing for about 60 yards in this fashion, it was held up again at a place where the jungle began to thin out. Light-machine-gun fire from Basha East was now encountered as well as sniping from the right flank. Ahead of the column, a distance of some eighty yards, was a bunker (on the western slope of Basha East) from which originated bursts of heavy fire. There were also two or three slit trenches in front. The column had therefore to halt here; and then exchanged fire with the bunker, but without any apparent effect. At 0900 hours the assaulting force was finally ordered to withdraw.

The other parties which had been sent a day earlier to cause diversion and blow up a bridge also met with only partial success. The party to the Signal Piquet went to Vownalu spur from where it advanced in thick mist to a nulla below the Signal Piquet. From here the ground rose steeply and had a rocky surface. After making three unsuccessful attempts to scale it, the column tried to go round *via* Kwe Lui, but could not reach its objective. Thereafter the advance was given up.

The road-ambush party marched down the Segyi Chaung on 6 August, built a bridge across it at RU 436710 and reached within 600 yards of the Kalembo—No. 3 Stockade road by the evening. At 0330 hours on the morning of 7 August, in pitch darkness it moved on towards the road and occupied ambush positions. Some Burmese bullock carts which were not stopped by the troops, however, gave the alarm to the Japanese who were working at a dump







nearby. The alarm having been given, the troops left the ambush position on the road, made a detour through the jungle, by-passing the Japanese working party and reached the road again near No. 2 Stockade. Here they came under heavy fire both from the right and the left flank but successfully stopped the attack by counter-fire. Some Japanese were killed in this exchange of fire but they removed the wounded and the dead except one who was searched by the Gurkhas. As no documents were found on his body, the identity of the unit to which he belonged could not be ascertained. After one more exchange of fire, the Gurkhas withdrew.

The bridge blowing party also left on the morning of 6 August and reached MS 9 on the main Kalemmyo road on the morning of 8 August after a difficult march through the hills and after crossing the Zi Chaung. Before it could reach the bridge which was to be blown, it had some exchange of fire with a Japanese party of troops guarding a dump. Some casualties were inflicted on the Japanese and then the party withdrew without reaching its objective.

Thus the whole of the operation 'Smasher' was only partly successful, but it served some useful purpose. The raids caused considerable surprise to the Japanese,<sup>27</sup> and though no firm identifications were available, some idea of their strength in the area was obtained.

### *Isolated Clashes*

For some time after these raids by the Indian troops, there was very little or practically no activity on this front ; but in September the Japanese patrols again became active in the Fort White area and several clashes occurred on the Pimpi ridge and Vownalu.<sup>28</sup> On 24 September, Chin Levies encountered and put to flight seven Burmese, three miles north of No. 3 Stockade. South of No. 3 Stockade also Japanese patrols were encountered. On 24 and 27 September, an observation post was the object of two hostile attacks which were both on Vownalu. In the No. 3 Stockade area a party of 30 Japanese troops advanced five miles northwards on 26 September. On the following day a Japanese platoon attacked Indian troops a mile north of Dolluang.<sup>29</sup>

Such activity was clearly a prelude to more serious attempts on the part of the Japanese, which it was expected would start in October or November. It also showed that the Japanese had reinforced the area and were planning an offensive.

<sup>27</sup> It was estimated that the Japanese had one platoon north of Theizang and seven platoons in the 3 Stockade area. IV Corps Sitrep No. 448, 10 August.

<sup>28</sup> *History of the 17 Indian Division*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> WIS No. 100 dated 1 October 1943.



## THE JAPANESE OFFENSIVE

This increased Japanese activity grew at the beginning of October into four thrusts by them into the hills from the north and south of Kalemmyo. Two of these were directed at the Falam sector and two at the Tiddim sector.<sup>30</sup>

The most southerly thrust was based on Tintha and moved up the valley of the Manipur river. On the morning of 7 October, about 150 Japanese troops approached the forward position of the Levies near Keipaw but were repulsed. However, they came again next day in greater strength, and, in spite of the casualties inflicted on them by the Levies, occupied Hata, where on 10 October they dug in and consolidated their position up to the river Dawng Va, which, however, they could not cross as the Levies had blown up the bridge before the arrival of the Japanese. Their strength at and around Hata was between 400 to 500.

The second thrust, ten miles further north, was based on Natchaung and proceeded up the valley of Pamun Chaung to Webula. A Japanese force of approximately one company supported by mortars attacked Webula on 7 October and succeeded in occupying it the same evening. From here the Japanese sent out small patrols towards the north-west, west and south, but did not make any movement in strength.

The third thrust was based on Kalemmyo and the Stockades and was directed against the Tiddim—Fort White—Falam road. Moving from No. 3 Stockade a Japanese force of about one platoon captured Ngazang on 6 October. No attempt was made by them to make an attack along the main road from No. 3 Stockade to Fort White, but an outflanking move was directed along the Pimpi ridge on 7 October. By the morning of 9 October, the Japanese had succeeded on occupying Pimpi after a three-hour action, in which they suffered many casualties.

The fourth thrust was aimed at the capture of Dolluang. Starting from the Kale Valley, a Japanese force of about two companies moved towards Dolluang and put in an attack on this place and on Lesan Mual, a high ground to the north, on 9 October. The attack was beaten back by the defenders of Dolluang, but Lesan Mual was secured by the Japanese. They made another attack on Dolluang in the afternoon, which too was repulsed. The Japanese, however, occupied the village of Saungdaw north-west of Lesan Mual which overlooked the track to Dolluang. This made it difficult to supply the garrison at Dolluang which was therefore forced to withdraw. The Japanese did not follow up the withdrawal; and the company which had defended the place so stubbornly moved to a

<sup>30</sup> IV Corps WIS No. 72 up to 13 Oct. 1942.



position one mile to the north-west. No further movement was made by the Japanese for sometime, but as a result of these four thrusts they had penetrated some eight miles into the hills before being stopped.<sup>31</sup> Two advantages flowed from these attacks for them: firstly, the IV Corps was left guessing as to the objective of the next offensive, whether it would come against Haka, Falam, Fort White or Tiddim; and secondly, by occupying the forward positions in the hills, the Japanese effectively closed all approaches to the Myittha and Falam valleys.

The situation of the Indian forces was naturally unsatisfactory and the IV Corps had been forced to adopt a defensive attitude till such time as the transport situation improved or reinforcements arrived. Lt.-Gen. G. A. P. Scoones, Commander IV Corps, has summed up the position in the following words:—<sup>32</sup>

- “(a) When, after the operations in May, it was decided to try to maintain a force of a weak brigade in the Tiddim area, it was recognised that its mobility would not permit it to move much beyond Fort White. The strength of this brigade was dictated by the number of air sorties which could be made available to maintain it, as the road to Tiddim was fair-weather only and, for the last 82 of the 164 miles from Imphal, it was and is an unmetalled jeep track which it was realised might collapse during the monsoon. This situation still largely obtains, and the slow arrival of replacement jeeps and spares had aggravated the position with regard to maintenance and mobility of forward troops.
- “(b) We have maintained a larger force in the Tiddim area than we undertook to do initially. This has put a high strain on transport and has resulted in much of the transport allotted becoming unserviceable. If spares had been available, this situation could have been much improved. Spares are not yet available.
- “(c) Our original object, which still holds good, was to ensure that we retained possession of the Tiddim area itself. This did not include provision for the maintenance of forces wide on the flanks of the main road, and as far east as the area of No. 3 Stockade. We cannot meet this additional commitment without an increase in jeep transport, which is not at present available, but should be available about 20-25 Oct. The Japanese have forestalled us in the forward area temporarily.

<sup>31</sup> IV Corps WIS No. 72. *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> IV Corps Commander's report to HQ Eastern Army, dated 10 October 1943.



“(d) If, as intended, we are to drive back the Japanese from the new positions now occupied by them, we must get at least one additional battalion forward to Tuitum. To provide the mobility necessary to enable forward troops to undertake limited offensive and to maintain this additional battalion, it is necessary to produce a further 55 jeeps. Thirty jeeps can be provided now but this will result in stocks in Tiddim being reduced to nil by the end of October, unless additional air supply resources are made available. No more jeeps are in sight until between 21-25 Oct., when 905 Jeep Company should arrive. Can the additional air supply be provided?”

“(e) Nothing more than limited offensives on a small scale can be undertaken until the remainder of 17 Indian Light Division can be brought forward and maintained in the Chin Hills. Unless there is some increase in air supply, this is a matter of the date on which the road will be sufficiently improved to admit of their maintenance and that on which four 15-cwt Truck Coys arrive south of the Manipur River for this purpose. 15 Dec. is calculated as being the earliest date by which the division can be concentrated in the Chin Hills.”

For the time being, however, orders were issued to 1/16 Punjab of the 23rd Indian Division to reach Tiddim area and support the troops already there. This battalion reached Tiddim from Waithou in the middle of October and came under command of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade. On arrival, after a difficult march through high mountains, the Punjabis were given the task of ‘sitting astride the road high up in the hills a mile and a half north of Fort White’. Surprisingly enough the Japanese made no further move for nearly a month after their October thrusts to penetrate more deeply into the hills. Meanwhile the Royal Air Force and the United States Army Air Force activity was kept up against Japanese positions, dumps and transport in the Chin Hills where most of the Japanese forward positions offered good targets.<sup>33</sup>

Towards the end of October, the Japanese showed some activity, particularly in the southern Chin Hills, and some minor clashes occurred.<sup>34</sup> But evidently this was for the purpose of strengthening and consolidating their positions as preparations for a fresh attack which was impending. Moreover 3 November was the date of the commemoration festival for the Japanese Emperor, and it was thought likely that they might resume their offensive operations about that date. As to the direction in which the Japanese

<sup>33</sup> IV Corps WIS No. 73.

<sup>34</sup> IV Corps WIS No. 74.



move might develop nothing could be said, but it was thought not unlikely that it might come either against Falam or against Bamboo Camp on the track Fort White—Falam. Possession of the latter would provide the Japanese with an axis in the shape of the jeep track along which they could advance on Fort White from the south.<sup>35</sup>

### *Fall of Falam and Haka*

The Japanese forces started probing towards Falam on 4 November when they were seen at a distance of about 4 miles to the east-south-east of it. But they withdrew down the Manipur river when fired upon by the troops of the Chin Hills Battalion.<sup>36</sup> Other hostile parties were seen again on this day and the next day; and very early on the morning of 7 November, Lente, four miles south-east of Falam, was attacked in strength. The position occupied by the Levies was 'rushed' in the dark and, after much hand-to-hand fighting, captured by the Japanese. With Lente in Japanese hands, it was impossible for the Indian troops to hold Falam with the forces then available in the town which was therefore evacuated in the afternoon.<sup>37</sup> Thus, exactly a month after the start of their attack on the Chin Hills, the Japanese had succeeded in capturing Falam. The occupation of the town had the effect of virtually isolating Haka from the Indian troops in the northern Chin Hills. The Japanese next move was therefore naturally towards Haka. Three days after the capture of Falam a place called Pioneer Camp, some 10 miles north of Haka, was captured and a movement towards Haka itself began. Elements of Chin Hills Battalion and Levies evacuated Haka, and the Japanese entered it on the evening of 11 November.<sup>38</sup> The garrison which was withdrawing westwards was followed by the Japanese and a rearguard engagement was fought at Timit. Though the Japanese suffered some casualties in this engagement they continued to push the garrison westwards upto a distance of about 25 miles from Haka.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, by 12 November, the Japanese were in possession of practically the whole of the south-eastern Chin Hills and therefore in a position to attack the Fort White and Tiddim area, both from the south and the east.

### *Loss of Fort White*

Soon after the capture of Falam and Haka, the Japanese increased their activity in the area of their strong-points constructed

<sup>35</sup> IV Corps WIS No. 75.

<sup>36</sup> Sitrep 357, 5 November. 601/186/W.D. Part XIX.

<sup>37</sup> Sitrep No. 540, dated 7 November.

<sup>38</sup> IV Corps WIS No. 77.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



in the month of October.<sup>40</sup> This was evidently a preliminary to the attack on Tiddim road and Fort White.

On the night of 12/13 November, two platoons of Japanese troops made an attack, under cover of darkness, on Point 6531 in the Vaona area. This point was held by one platoon of the B Company of 1/16 Punjab. The attack was beaten back with heavy casualties. Later in the morning of 13 November, the Japanese put in another attack but were again repulsed. Their casualties in these two attacks were estimated at 40, including one officer. The Punjabi platoon holding this outpost was reinforced during the day.

The Japanese had, however, made this attack on Point 6531 as a diversion, under cover of which a bigger force was moved northwards through the jungle to a point east of MS 54, where it lay up for an attack to be made next day. On 14 November, when the real attack came, dispositions of the Indian troops were as follows:—<sup>41</sup>

The 1/16 Punjab (less two companies) and one company of 1/3 GR were in MS 52 position; one platoon of B Company of 1/16 Punjab was at Point 6531 plus the platoon which had repulsed the Japanese there on 13 November; and one platoon of 1/16 Punjab was at MS 54. The 1/10 GR was at Kennedy Peak, 1/3 GR (less one company) and a section of the mountain artillery at Fort White. The detailed dispositions are as shown in the map on page 83.

At about 2300 hours on the night of 13/14 November, the guerilla section near MS 54 reported that the Japanese were digging in there, and a little later at about 2345 hours the attack on MS 54 position began. This post was normally held by two platoons but their effective strength at this time was that of only one full platoon. It had been agreed earlier on the evening of 14 November, that 1/10 GR at Kennedy Peak would come to the help of the Punjabi platoon at MS 54 if the latter were attacked, and would counter-attack the Japanese. If help was needed by the platoon at MS 54 it was to fire two red Verrey lights.

The Japanese force which attacked this platoon was estimated at between two hundred to four hundred, but the small Indian force gallantly held out and repulsed the first attack. After a couple of hours the second attack also came and the defenders, being hard pressed, fired two red Verrey lights, calling for counter-attack by 1/10 GR.<sup>42</sup> The 1/16 Punjab Headquarters who saw the

<sup>40</sup> These strong points were at Vownalu, Pimpi and Dolluang.

<sup>41</sup> Telegraphic message from IV Corps to Fourteenth Army, 15 November 1942.

<sup>42</sup> Report by Offg. Comde., 1/16 Punjab, on the action at MS 54 and MS 52. File No. 8763.





Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten of Burma  
Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia





General Joseph Stilwell (U.S.)  
Deputy Supreme Allied Com-  
mander, SEAC



Air Chief Marshal  
Sir Richard Peirse  
Allied Air C-in-C, SEAC



signal for help go up in the sky confirmed it to 1/10 GR by telephone. However, no help came from the Gurkhas, but the defenders continued to resist as best they could. "The night wore on, no help came, the post hung on until the last round of ammunition had been fired" when the men were ordered to withdraw, and covered their getaway by charging the Japanese with the bayonet.<sup>43</sup> However, only a few survived to tell the tale.

#### 14 November

The Japanese column then moved south towards the position held by the B Company of 1/3 GR at about 0530 hours. Some officers standing on the high ground on the north-west of the B Company's positions saw about 100 to 200 men approaching through the jungle. In the semi-darkness they were first taken to be Gurkhas, but a few minutes later they fired a few tracer rounds towards the high ground which revealed that they were Japanese. The Gurkhas who were holding the positions on the lower western slopes of the ridge were, therefore, ordered to move up as otherwise they were in danger of being cut off. This, however, could not be done on account of the speed of the Japanese advance. Instead, two reserve sections of the Gurkhas were moved down to the lower slopes to reinforce the section already there.

At about 0545 hours the Japanese attacked by coming up the ridge from the south-east. Their western flank was covered by light-machine-guns and they advanced in extended order, in quick time, firing from the hip. As they advanced they were met by fire from the few prepared positions. But such positions were so few—the Gurkhas had not dug in—that most of the soldiers had to take up improvised positions behind the trees from where they returned the Japanese fire. But the Japanese, being reinforced, came up in close-packed waves and continued to attack in spite of suffering casualties. Within half an hour the Gurkha positions were overrun by sheer weight of numbers and the Gurkhas were driven back towards the battalion headquarters to the south-east of the jungle. A company post also fell in the same sweep. Meanwhile two platoons of C Company—to the south-west of the battalion headquarters, arrived and joined the remainder of the B Company, 1/3 GR. This combined force attempted to drive into the jungle, but could not penetrate far and was soon brought to a stop by Japanese fire.

Simultaneously, the battalion headquarters and the mess area were also attacked. In a series of suicidal charges, the Japanese overran the headquarters area and were soon in occupation of the B Company's Hill, and the headquarters area in considerable force.

<sup>43</sup> *The Fighting Cock*, p. 72.



Three officers standing together at one place were all killed including the commanding officer when a shell burst in their midst.

Meanwhile, the ammunition of A, B and C Companies was getting exhausted; hence order was given for everyone to withdraw into the D Company area to the east of the road. "Slowly the tired battalion concentrated within this keep, with the Jap growling at them but not pressing too close, for he had not come off lightly".<sup>44</sup> On reaching there it was discovered that B Company of 1/16 Punjab, which had been at Point 6531 near Vaona (the scene of fighting on the night of 12/13 November) was also arriving there. This company had been again attacked on 14 November by the Japanese who had surrounded Point 6531. The company had attempted to fight back to MS 52 but its ammunition having run out, it moved towards the D Company's area,<sup>45</sup> where a stock of the situation was taken and it was discovered that the following troops had reached there:—<sup>46</sup>

A Company 1/16 Punjab,	about 30 who had been manning positions covering the road
B Company 1/16 Punjab,	about 80 but with very little ammunition
C Company 1/16 Punjab,	about 25 to 30
D Company 1/16 Punjab,	about 60
B Company 1/3 GR	about 52.

In view of the greatly superior strength of the Japanese and extremely limited ammunition supply, the officer commanding decided that the only course left open for the battalion was to withdraw across country to Kennedy Peak *via* Laibung, avoiding the known tracks.<sup>47</sup> They slipped away during the night and reached Kennedy Peak at 0700 hours on the morning of 15 November. Many men who had been missing joined the battalion later and the final count of casualties was not very high.

### *Fort White Abandoned*

The Japanese were now in control of the road connecting Fort White with Tiddim between MS 52 and MS 54. Another Japanese force had attacked the outlying companies of 1/3 GR on Ngazang spur and below Fort White and forced them back to the main track junction.<sup>48</sup> As a result, the position of forces in Fort White itself became precarious and they were withdrawn to Tiddim and sent to the hill west of Vital Corner. The Japanese occupied Fort White but did not follow up their success.

<sup>44</sup> *The Fighting Cock*, p. 73.

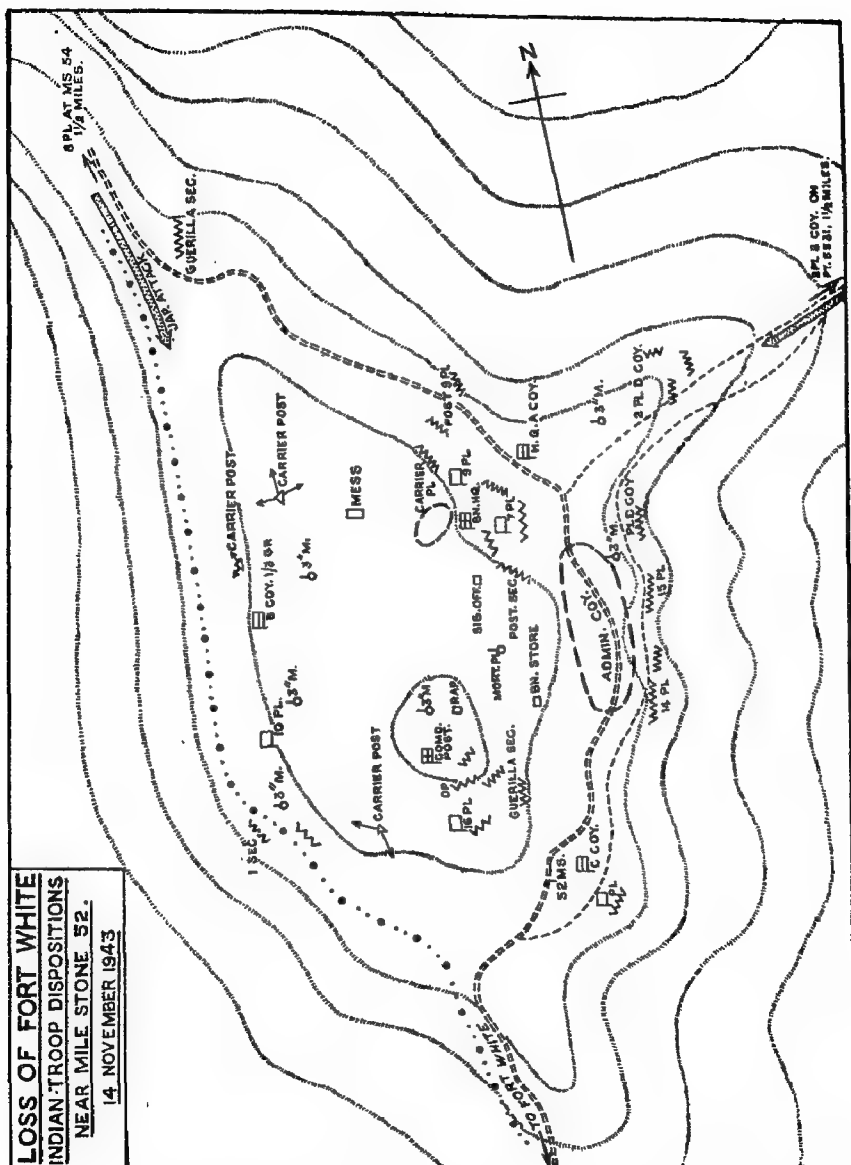
<sup>45</sup> Sitrep 548, 601/186/W.D.

<sup>46</sup> Major Newall's report, File 601/8763/H.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *History of the 17 Indian Division*, p. 31.







The Japanese troops which took part in these operations belonged to the 33rd Japanese Division, some of the units of which had already seen action against Indian troops in 1942 in the battle of the Sittang river. The operations in the Chin Hills were in the nature of preparations for an offensive against Imphal, orders for which were given in January 1944.<sup>49</sup>

### *Causes of Failure*

The failure of the Indian troops to stop the Japanese from pushing their line up to Fort White and getting control of the Chin Hills may be ascribed, among other reasons, to the following:—

- (1) undue reliance on the Levies,
- (2) insufficient regular troops in the area due to lack of maintenance facilities,
- (3) unsuitability of defensive posts built for complete sections as opposed to a series of two-men fox holes. "If the action enforced one lesson above others, it was the necessity to dig".<sup>50</sup>

Among other reasons may be mentioned the speed with which the Japanese moved and the alacrity with which, once in the jungle, they got snipers and light machine-guns up the trees.<sup>51</sup>

Before we proceed to describe the operations planned for 1944 in this region, it may be relevant to give an account of the operations of the Long Range Penetration Groups—the Chindits—whose role was to probe into the hostile country and disrupt the Japanese communications, an operation conducted in the dry months of 1943, though not with absolute success. In the succeeding chapters an account has been given of these activities of the Indian forces.

<sup>49</sup> *History of the Japanese 33rd Division*, SEATIC Bulletin No. 245, pp. 26-27. See also SEATIC Bulletin No. 240, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> *The Fighting Cock*, p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> Major Newall's report, *op. cit.*



## CHAPTER V

# The Chindits

### *Formation of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade*

It has been mentioned in an earlier chapter that the planning for the recapture of Burma had begun in March 1942 even before the Japanese had completely occupied that country. Throughout the succeeding months, many plans were discussed both in India and the United Kingdom but most of them had to be given up or postponed for certain reasons. However, the Arakan expedition was the only operation which was mounted in any strength in the winter of 1942-43 and all other operations, more comprehensive in character, were planned to take place a year later, namely in the dry season of 1943-44. Pending such an event, some activity was essential in Upper Burma also. It was therefore decided that in addition to the Arakan offensive on the coast-line, some Long Range Penetration Groups should be employed in Upper Burma for harassing the Japanese lines of communication. The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade organised by Brigadier Wingate was to be employed in such a role, and if possible small detachments of parachute troops were also to be used. This group formed the first Chindit expedition.

The brigade was designed to penetrate occupied Burma to a depth of some 200 to 300 miles in the rear of Japanese forward positions. It was neither given nor was considered strong enough for a defensive or preventive role. Its role was to be purely offensive, and it was to rely on mobility, concealment and unpredictable movement to achieve surprise and avoid destruction. The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was intended to be in employment for a period of four to five months within Japanese territory, provided that the Royal Air Force could drop the necessary stores, which, if need be, might be replenished from local sources. In order to achieve the best results with the minimum sacrifice, it was laid down that the brigade should avoid fighting with the Japanese as far as possible in their forward areas. But the difficulties of such a course were clearly visualised by the Chiefs of Staff, who, in their paper No. 28 dated 22 October, 1942, came to the conclusion that it was impossible to avoid a fight "north of an east to west line through Shwebo".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Historical Section File No. 21.



It was clearly realised that the brigade ought to operate in Upper Burma at a time when successful major operations elsewhere were likely to influence the local population to be friendly and sympathetic to the Allied cause, and communicate to it all information in preference to the Japanese. It was to carry on operations in the area Shwebo-Katha-Monywa. These were likely to prove of great value both to the Chinese operations in the Hukawng valley, and to the advance of the IV Corps on the Chindwin.<sup>2</sup>

The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade had been formed by Field-Marshal Wavell in consultation with Brigadier Orde Charles Wingate on principles of Long Range Penetration (which had hitherto not been employed against the Japanese) with a view to countering Japanese tactics of jungle warfare, including infiltration on a small scale. Brigadier Wingate<sup>3</sup> was a regular artillery officer who had specialised in guerilla methods of warfare. He was asked to prepare plans for creating diversions behind the Japanese lines in Burma by deep penetration, and dislocate their offensive plans against India. Their successful campaigns in Malaya and Burma had invested the Japanese army with a perhaps exaggerated reputation for skill and invincibility. It was to be Wingate's mission to shatter this myth.

Wingate was a military genius, though no superman. He had the guerilla's faith in courage, surprise and bluff and believed that "nothing is so devastating as to pounce upon the enemy in the dark, smite him hip and thigh, and vanish silently into the night". This is exactly what his men did later in the jungles of Burma. "Burning desert and rugged and chaotic mountains were his favourite terrain. Night was the time of his greatest achievements". His expedition into Burma was planned on daring lines. At Maymyo in March 1942, he gave a lecture to the General Staff on Long Range Penetration explaining his theories by personal experience of comparable operations in Palestine and in Abyssinia. General Alexander at once agreed to Wingate's proposals and gave him all possible support thereafter. In June 1942, General Wavell, under whom Wingate had served as Intelligence Officer in Palestine, fully approved of his plans and authorised him to form a brigade on the lines he had proposed.

### *Theory of Long Range Penetration*

The theory of Long Range Penetration was not a new one. The

<sup>2</sup> Joint Planning Staff, Paper No. 38, dated 17 November 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Before the war, Wingate had successfully organised a Jewish volunteer militia in Palestine to fight Arab terrorism. As a recognition of his meritorious services, he was decorated with the Distinguished Service Order in 1938. Three years later, he again organised guerilla bands of Abyssinian patriots against the Italians and entered Addis Ababa, capital of Abyssinia, in triumph on May 5, 1941 by the side of Emperor Haile Selassie. His success in Abyssinia "had marked him out as a first class guerilla fighter and commander".



advantages of disrupting the enemy's communications, and thereby causing confusion and uncertainty behind his forward areas, have ever been apparent to the military experts. From the earliest times, spies and saboteurs have been employed to this end. In recent years, guerilla operations behind the enemy lines have been carried out extensively in German occupied Russia, France, Yugoslavia and Greece, while Short Range Penetration tactics were employed by the Japanese with marked success during their early operations in South-East Asia and Burma. Nevertheless, it may be true to say that such operations had always been small-scale, haphazard affairs not comparable in scale with the Long Range Penetration, conceived and executed by Brigadier (later Major-General) Wingate. In Upper Burma, for the first time in 1943, and for the second time during the first half of 1944, a large, well equipped and highly trained body of men operating in an independent role was able to disrupt and, at times, altogether block the main Japanese supply route to their northern army.

Brigadier Wingate always maintained that wireless and air power were the two modern weapons of warfare which had never been exploited to the full. His Long Range Penetration force was built around these weapons, and its undoubted usefulness was demonstrated clearly in his two expeditions in Burma. He stated the principles thus: "Granted the power to maintain forces by air and direct them by wireless, it is possible to operate regular ground forces for indefinite periods in the heart of enemy occupied territory to the peril of his war machine".<sup>4</sup> His technique was to get supplies mostly dropped from the air; in addition, the troops under his command were to live off the country. Communications between columns and air base was by means of wireless. There was no organised line of communication for the brigade in the orthodox sense. "The vulnerable artery is the Line of Communication winding through the jungle", said Wingate. "Have no line of communication on the jungle floor, bring in the goods, like Father Christmas, down the chimney". At the root of Wingate's plan lay his belief that one fighting man at the heart of the enemy's military machine was worth many hundreds in the forward battle areas. Undoubtedly, a force is most vulnerable far behind its lines, and a small attacking force could easily create havoc out of all proportion to its numbers. If it found the going tough, it could break off the engagement and disperse in small parties to baffle pursuit, and reassemble at a rendezvous a few miles away from the scene of action.

For successful penetration, a Long Range Force has to depend a good deal on the nature of the country and the attitude of the

<sup>4</sup> Wingate, *Report On operations of 77th Indian Infantry Brigade in Burma* (February to June 1943), p. 1.



people. If great areas of "impassable" country exist in the immediate neighbourhood of hostile occupied territory, the task of the Long Range Penetration Force is greatly facilitated, as it can easily find suitable places for concealment. Such areas inhabited by people not definitely hostile are, therefore, ideally suited to this type of warfare, but it would be a mistake to assume that without a helpful terrain, a Long Range Force cannot achieve its object.

The size of such a force cannot be laid down with preciseness. It depends mainly upon the availability of aircraft, and the depth of its penetration is determined by the air-supply factor. The size of the columns must be adjusted to the conditions of warfare and the strength of the opposing force. Wingate had successfully tried the division of the force into columns both in Palestine and in Abyssinia, and had come to the conclusion that columns must be big enough to deliver blows of the necessary weight while small enough to slip through the enemy's net. The more numerous these columns, the greater their individual and collective security. The correctness of these principles was clearly demonstrated by Wingate's men whom he called *Chindits* after the fabulous griffins which guard the Burmese temples.

As regards employment, several theories have been put forward, but a Long Range Penetration Force is designed to play an essentially offensive role in co-operation with major thrusts by the main force. Judged in their proper perspective, Long Range Penetration Groups are detachments from the main forces and their operations are governed by the same principles as for all other detachments. They have a value if they succeed in containing superior hostile forces away from the main effort, or if their operations, offensive or destructive, have an effect on the enemy's conduct of the main battle. To use such groups alone and unsupported, as was done during the first *Chindit* expedition, is unlikely to achieve results commensurate with the almost certain loss of a large proportion of these highly trained and specialised troops.

It follows, therefore, that Long Range Penetration Groups should operate in conjunction with, even if widely separated from, the main force; and the plans of the two must be closely co-ordinated and correlated. This will require the most careful timing so that the effect of the Long Range Penetration Groups may be felt at the right time during the execution of the main plan. As Wingate has put it, "Columns of Penetration should be employed as a vital part of the major plan of conquest."<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Wingate considered that Long Range Penetration

<sup>5</sup> Wingate's *Report*, *op. cit.* p. 1.



Groups were better placed than any other group forces "to assist the air arm to direct its strategic offensive", and "exploit on the spot the opportunity created by its attacks". The presence of such groups in an area makes possible the creation of a net-work of intelligence far superior to any which can be organised from outside the hostile territory. He also considered that Royal Air Force sections, commanded by pilots having some operational experience, were best qualified to carry on these tasks, which must be regarded as an essential part of Long Range Penetration.

### *Objects of Wingate's Force*

The primary object of Wingate's first expedition was to test his theory. If it proved sound, further and larger operations of the same or similar type might be undertaken as a part of the plan of the reconquest of Burma. At the same time, it was realised that the factor of surprise might have to be inevitably sacrificed. Once a Long Range Penetration expedition was undertaken experimentally, the possibility of subsequent expeditions of the same type would be taken into account by the Japanese while preparing their battle plans and counter-measures.

Wingate, no doubt, considered the Japanese to be adept at Short Range Penetration, but he believed that they had not the skill to grasp the problems of Long Range Penetration Groups. At any rate, he considered them incapable of operating the latter, because it would require air superiority which they did not possess and were unlikely to get in Burma.

A secondary object of Wingate's first expedition was to test the revolt potential of the Burmans, especially of the hill tribes, Chins, Karens and Kachins, and arrange for their help during the reconquest of Burma. Wingate found the tribesmen uniformly friendly in the course of his expedition and has related that he came across no instance himself when British or Indian troops were ever betrayed by them.

### FORMATION AND TRAINING

In June 1942 Wingate was given a number of units from which he decided to form eight columns—four basically British, and four basically Gurkha—after a preliminary course of intensive training in jungle warfare. These units did not consist of picked troops by any means, but were mostly composed of second-line troops. The units from which the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was formed were the 13th Battalion of the King's Liverpool Regiment, 3/2 Gurkha Rifles, 142 Company, 2nd Burma Rifles and a number of Royal Air Force Sections, Signal Section and a Mule Transport Company.



*The 13th Battalion, the King's Liverpool Regiment*

The 13th Battalion, the King's Liverpool Regiment, was a war-time unit which, since its formation, had been employed on coast defence in England, and subsequently on an internal security role in India.<sup>6</sup> The men were not young, their ages varying between twenty-eight and thirty-five, a large proportion being married. Most of these men had expected to do garrison work during the duration of the war. They had had no experience of warfare and were "born and bred to town and factory life, to the comfortable routine of a big plant and the bright lights and smooth pavements of Manchester and Liverpool".<sup>7</sup> It was not surprising therefore that 40% of them were rejected during the period of training because of their low physical standards. The deficiencies in their ranks were supplied by infantry drafts from the reinforcement camp at Deolali, an unfortunate necessity which interfered with the continuity of training. As Wingate himself puts it: "This piecemeal reinforcement greatly reduced the effects of training".<sup>8</sup> The battalion at first displayed little enthusiasm for the role allotted to it; but happily, at the end of the training, the right approach to the men produced a high morale which was maintained throughout the expedition.<sup>9</sup>

*3/2 Gurkha Rifles*

The 3/2 Gurkha Rifles also was a war-time unit which lacked officers who could speak the language of their men. Wingate has recorded that only two of its British officers could speak excellent Gurkhali. Most of the officers had little knowledge of infantry tactics and of the command of men. The unit had a strength of some 750 men which was reduced to 550 just before the commencement of operations owing to the process of "weeding out", and a large draft arrived only a few weeks before the end of training. Thus most of the men of this unit entered Burma insufficiently trained. Eventually, however, the adaptability of the officers and the keenness for soldiering and toughness of the Gurkhas soon remedied these handicaps.

*142 Company*

The function of the 142 Company, a specialised unit, comprising commandos, volunteers from infantry regiments and a few regular sappers from the Royal Engineers, was to provide each column with "a squad of fighting saboteurs". It was given a highly specialised training, but about one-fourth of the personnel proved inadequate for

<sup>6</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Charles J. Rolo, *Wingate's Raiders*, (1946), p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Fergusson: *Beyond the Chindwin*, (Collins, 1945), p. 8.



the role earmarked for the unit and had to leave before concentration. The Company's work on the whole was a marked success, and Wingate attributed it to the indefatigable work and profound grasp of the subject by its officer-in-charge, Major Calvert, who in his early life was a boxing and swimming champion. He has been aptly described as "Dynamite Mike" for he was a professional wrecker. His early war-time career had been spent behind the enemy lines. He did a useful job in Norway against the Germans, and in Malaya and Burma he carried out several rearguard demolitions. He was a born leader of men with a keen brain and a lively imagination, and was noted for his courage and coolness when in a tight corner. In the words of Charles J. Rolo, "His courage became something of a legend even in Wingate's Mob, where courage was rather taken for granted".<sup>10</sup>

### *2nd Burma Rifles*

The third component unit, the 2nd Burma Rifles, was a composite battalion of Karens, Chins and Kachins. The Karens belonged mostly to the Irrawaddy Delta, between Rangoon and Bassein, although some came from Tenasserim, "the long tail of Burma", and the Karenni Hills. Most of them were Christians and made "admirable soldiers, intelligent, willing, energetic and brave".<sup>11</sup> The Chins came from the Chin Hills in the north-west Burma and the Kachins from the hills of the same name in north-east Burma. The force had marched out of Burma early in 1942 along with the British officers to India, and had spent an arduous time at Hoshiarpur before joining the hard training in the neighbourhood of Saugor.

Wingate has recorded that he never had under his command in the field a better body of men than the 2nd Burma Rifles. The role assigned to it was that of a reconnaissance unit for the Long Range Penetration Group, because of the intimate knowledge of its men of the country and the people of Burma. They were mainly responsible for intelligence work and for propaganda. The men excelled at rapid, bold and intelligent patrolling in face of the Japanese; at obtaining local information and at disseminating propaganda. They were also adepts in handling boats and at living off the country, an art which they taught their British comrades. In jungle-craft they were unsurpassable and their commanders were pleasantly surprised by their excellence. Always overworked, these men maintained their cheerfulness and loyalty throughout the expedition. The force was meant to be, "the eyes, ears and mouthpiece of the expedition".<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Wingate's Raiders*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Beyond the Chindwin*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 32.



### *Royal Air Force Sections*

The Royal Air Force Sections attached to the various columns played a valuable part in the operation of the Long Range Penetration Group by maintaining regular contacts with the Royal Air Force base at Agartala, selecting suitable sites for supply-droppings to columns from time to time and directing pilots to bomb Japanese dispositions. The officers showed excellent fighting qualities, and, in the words of Wingate, "were all that could be desired".<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately they did not find the scope that may normally be expected when a Long Range Penetration Group is operating offensively behind the enemy lines, but experience proved the wisdom of having Royal Air Force personnel with columns to maintain contact with the Royal Air Force.

### *Signals*

A Brigade Signal Section from the Royal Corps of Signals provided a most important link between ground and air. Fully trained signallers were unfortunately too few in number, so that no signalling detachments were supplied to the individual columns of the brigade.

### *The Mule Transport Company*

The Mule Transport Company formed a valuable part of the brigade. It was decided that the men should be Gurkhas from the 3/2 Gurkha Rifles, but neither the mules nor the men were available until November 1942. This delayed training considerably and seriously inconvenienced the columns in their march. During the training period, the brigade was woefully short of officers who could impart proper training in animal management. The physical effort of leading a mule is great and the muleteer in a Long Range Penetration Group required, in addition to physical toughness which the Gurkha possessed in abundance, to be a fully trained fighting man.

### *Training*

The neighbourhood of Saugor in the Central Provinces (now Madhya Pradesh) was chosen for training the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade because of its supposed similarity to the dry zone of Upper Burma. In reality the two regions did not bear much resemblance. As Fergusson writes: "The jungle in which we afterwards operated bore no resemblance whatever to that in which we trained".<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, it lacked a wide, strong-flowing river, like the Chindwin or the Irrawaddy, for the teaching of swimming and the practice in river-crossing.

<sup>13</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Beyond the Chindwin*, p. 8.



Training started in July 1942, but the late arrival of the mules and the muleteers delayed full-scale column exercises until December of the same year. The troops at Wingate's disposal did not consist of any crack regiment, but characteristically enough he made the fullest use of them. While having a look at his troops, Wingate's only comment was: "I'll make any man who's fit a jungle fighter capable of coping with the best the Japanese have got".<sup>15</sup> The region in which the brigade received its strenuous training for six months was thirty-five miles away from the nearest small town. When training commenced, the weather was most unsuited for large-scale exercises. It was the period, on the eve of the monsoon, when temperatures rise very high and the heat is sweltering. As a result, several men collapsed from heat exhaustion and Wingate did the doctoring himself before the arrival of the medical contingent.

The only instructors with previous knowledge of Long Range Penetration Group were Brigadier Wingate on the strategic and tactical side, and Major Calvert on the demolition side. Centralisation was therefore more or less inevitable. The general standard of education and intelligence was uniformly low, both in the case of officers as well as men. Progress, therefore, was of necessity slow.

Brigadier Wingate believed in realistic exercises discarding the conventional methods of "tactical exercises without troops". He attached the greatest importance to tactical exercises on sand-pits of large scale, usually four hundred square yards in size. Soldiers were represented by a match-stick sticking out of the ground, and forests by small pieces of bamboo. In these sand-pit exercises, every imaginable situation was covered—the column being attacked on the march or in bivouac, ambushes, dispersion, use of mortars and machine-guns etc. Wingate, in one of his lectures to his men, explained why he gave so much attention to detail: "The good commander requires an anxious, meticulously accurate, and ever active imagination. By constantly insisting on scrupulous realism in the detail of his images, he will learn to picture only what he can perform and to reject all fancy".<sup>16</sup> It is regrettable that this excellent method of training was not always employed "probably because of stupidity and laziness".<sup>17</sup>

An essential part of training was the exercises in the methods of dispersal, viz. the breaking up of columns into groups of 40-50 men and their reassembly later at prearranged rendezvous. This training was to prove of the greatest value on numerous occasions later and, finally, when withdrawal from Burma became necessary. Due

<sup>15</sup> Cited in *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> *Wingate's Report*, p. 4.



to a variety of reasons, it was not possible to collect the brigade as a whole, or even a major portion of it in the first two camps in Ramna and Abchand. At the end of September 1942, however, the brigade had assembled some 2000 of its eventual 3000 personnel. An exercise was soon witnessed by the Commander-in-Chief, but Wingate was dissatisfied with the results; he was however encouraged by the former to carry on. Wingate was a hard taskmaster. He set up before himself a very high standard of efficiency, and rejected any one who did not come up to his expectations. In the course of training, several officers were 'weeded out' for failing to satisfy the brigadier. He used to remark: "The only test of an officer is in the field of battle. No officer should be allowed to hold a rank that he cannot carry in battle." His slogan for the brigade was, "we have to imitate Tarzan", and he therefore gave them arduous training in all aspects of jungle-fighting. He taught them how to find their way in thick forests, how to march unnoticed, how to cover up their tracks and lay false tracks for the enemy, and how to recognise landmarks in the jungle. He also trained them thoroughly in infiltration tactics, patrol work and river crossing. He took them on forced marches with heavy packs, until they became very tough, capable of marching thirty to forty miles per day. "The phenomenal thoroughness of this training paid high dividends in confidence and morale, and was largely responsible for the success of the expedition".

On 20 November 1942, Wingate flew over what proved in the event to be the exact path of the brigade's subsequent operations and, on the basis of what he saw, reported to the Commander-in-Chief that the plan was "feasible". He fully discussed all the details of the operation with the commander of IV Corps, who made some useful suggestions and modifications. At this meeting it was decided to raise a Bullock Transport Company in Imphal, and arrangements were made for the transit of the brigade through the IV Corps area. An advance headquarters of the brigade was sent to Imphal to implement these and other preliminary measures.

On Wingate's return the brigade was put through a very severe five-day exercise designed to test the signals, ciphers and transport. This proved that it could be handled with success. But Wingate, the perfectionist, was as before not fully satisfied with the performance of the various columns. As he puts it, "As usual the results were dubious".<sup>18</sup> This exercise was followed by the one planned by Central Command, known as the Jhansi Scheme, which was far tougher. The object was the capture of Jhansi, about 120 miles to

<sup>18</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 5.



the north, and it was designed to test the endurance of the troops. It involved long and rapid marches by every column, culminating in the delivery of a concerted attack.

This elaborate exercise was carried out in December 1942 and was completely successful. It demonstrated clearly that the troops could be depended upon to carry out the object of the Long Range Penetration Group. The signals and ciphers worked well, the Sabotage Squad did useful work and the mules though led by untrained muleteers did not fare badly. Some criticism might be levelled against the discipline of the troops, whose individual training was far from complete, but the Army Commander came to the conclusion that the brigade was fit for operations.

After a short rest, special trains carried the brigade to a railhead about 130 miles distant from Imphal, on 9 January 1943, from where the troops marched to their destination, Imphal.

### *R.A.F. Co-operation*

The expedition had for its basis an efficient supply-dropping by the Royal Air Force. Unfortunately, supply-dropping planes were not available at Saugor though a few unrealistic exercises were carried out there with Lysanders. It was, therefore, with great relief that all ranks noted that the first realistic exercise carried out at night with supply-dropping planes, after their arrival at Manipur Road, was successful. If it had failed, the operation would have had to be cancelled.

### *Mule and Bullock Transport*

Since the mules joined the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade during the last stages of training, it was not possible to give the muleteers sufficient training. The time-factor plus lack of knowledge of animal management led to both the mules and muleteers being trained the hard way—by undertaking long marches with their columns, with full loads and equipment and under observation. Because of the shortage of mules in India during 1942, Wingate, against the views of the Remount Directorate, bought bullocks in the Central Provinces, of which eighty later swam the Irrawaddy and carried loads. To counter-balance their slowness and clumsiness, they had the advantage of being 'walking rations' and all were eventually eaten.

### *Signals, Ciphers and Intelligence*

The whole operation depended upon good signal communications, so the Signal Section was fully tested during the training period under proper supervision. The Royal Corps of Signals personnel were, in the words of Wingate, "good on the whole but insufficient



in number".<sup>10</sup> Naturally, secrecy of signals was essential, so it was fortunate that the Royal Air Force was able to produce quantities of One Time Pads, which proved by far the most satisfactory and the safest type of cipher as the loss of one did not compromise the remainder.

Throughout training, the brigade had to run an intelligence office to deal with Burma. It obtained and linen-backed four tons weight of maps of Burma and maintained a complete picture of the Japanese battle order and dispositions of troops.

Full training regarding physical features of Burma was given in the operations room at Imphal before entering Burma. A large room, 25 feet square, was papered over all walls and floors with maps of all scales and air photo mosaics of all probable objectives. On the floor, a complete set of one-inch-to-one-mile maps provided means of checking the role of columns in detail with all officers in turn. This was done successively for five days on an average of twelve times per day. Training in geology and natural history and, in particular, forest lore was essential for all officers and was given by the Forest Officer, Saugor.

### *Food, Clothing and Equipment*

The hard-scale ration issued was a good one capable of keeping a man fit and vigorous for some three months at a spell, but, in practice, not one of the columns received its full-scale ration in the field, the average being 40 rations in 80 days.

The clothing used by the brigade was of standard army issue with the exception of a design of water-wing for crossing rivers which the brigade produced after several experiments. These water-wings proved extremely useful both for crossing rivers and subsequently for carrying rice and other small articles; they were carried in the man's pack. The inflatable rubber belts, however, which became available later and were dropped on columns towards the end of the campaign were much preferred.

The standard Indian pattern ammunition boot was found to be so badly made and of such poor material that its average life was not more than two weeks. Efforts were made, therefore, before the brigade went into the field, to re-equip all ranks with Australian, South African or English boots, and this was done in the majority of cases. These three types of boots proved good and wore well.

Special light-weight but warm Kashmir blankets were obtained and issued at the rate of one per man; they proved superior to the usual army blanket and had the additional advantage of occupying less space.

<sup>10</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 7.



Some of the bigger men used the Everest Man Pack carrier, although it weighed seven pounds, in preference to the Mills equipment. But the Gurkhas and the Burmese soldiers never carried them, because these were made of rod-iron and were too heavy for the work required of them. Later, experiments were made with similar carriers of tubular aluminium construction manufactured in Calcutta, weighing only one and a quarter pound.



## CHAPTER VI

# Wingate's Early Operations

### THE PLAN OF OPERATIONS

In the general plan of operations for the recapture of north Burma in the first half of 1943, the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was assigned the important role of cutting the Japanese lines of communication by operating in their rear in the area Shwebo-Katha-Monywa. The plan as adopted by the India Command envisaged the advance into north Burma by the IV Corps (17th and 23rd Indian Divisions) with the object of occupying strategic positions along the Chindwin river between Kalewa and Sittaung. These operations were designed to assist the advance of the Chinese forces from Yunnan into northern Burma by engaging as many Japanese forces as possible.<sup>1</sup>

There were two possible routes from Imphal over the high range into Burma. In 1942, Imphal—Palel—Tamu road had been constructed but it was "a single-way mountain-road" from Palel to Tamu, a distance of about 36 miles, and was liable to frequent interruptions during the monsoon period. The second possible line of advance from Imphal lay via Bishenpur to Tiddim; thence to Fort White and Kalemio. Although this route was much longer than the first, it had the advantage of being protected by the hill-ranges until close to Kalemio. The route from Tamu to Kalemio lay through a region which was exposed to Japanese attacks from across the Chindwin. The commander of the IV Corps thought that the Tiddim route being safer should be developed, and all the available road-making resources were employed on it. Field-Marshal Wavell inspected this route in February 1943 and was of the opinion that it would not be serviceable for a long time to come. He therefore ordered the stoppage of all road-construction work on the Tiddim route and diverted road-making effort to the improvement of the Tamu Road.

The lack of transport and of road-building material led to the postponement of operations against Kalewa and Sittaung. When news came from General Stilwell at the beginning of February 1943 that Chinese troops would not be able to undertake an offensive from Yunnan as originally scheduled, the strategical basis of an advance by the IV Corps disappeared. In the event, the operations

<sup>1</sup> Wavell: *Despatch on Operations in the India Command, 1 January to 20 June 1943*, p. 5. See also JPS Paper No. 40 of 27 November 1940.



of Indian troops in the Kabaw valley were confined to strong offensive patrols only.

The Long Range Penetration Group's original role was to assist this two-pronged operation, but since it was abandoned, the question arose whether the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade should be employed at all during the winter of 1942-43 in Upper Burma. Before any final decision was taken in the matter, the brigade had moved to Imphal according to schedule in January 1943. Field-Marshal Wavell went to Imphal and had a long discussion with Brigadier Wingate on 6 February 1943, as a result of which he decided to launch the operations, "in order to gain experience of the working of these columns".<sup>2</sup> The arguments in favour of the immediate employment of the brigade have been set forth clearly by Wingate in his report. The entire theory of Long Range Penetration had not till then been fully tested against a skilful military force like that of the Japanese. The personnel of the brigade had reached a high pitch of expectation and the abandonment of the expedition at such a crucial juncture might have been disastrous. In the words of Wingate, "The Brigade had been raised and trained for operations in the winter of 42/43 and the whole tempo, physical and psychological, set to that tune. Not to use it was to lose it."<sup>3</sup>

From the point of view of gaining experience of such tactics and collecting information about Japanese dispositions and the attitude of the Burmese, much can be said about the utility of the expedition. In addition to this, there was the strong probability that the Japanese were preparing offensive plans somewhere on the Burma border and the most likely method of upsetting them was to disorganise their lines of communication by cutting the Mandalay—Myitkyina railway, which formed the backbone of the Japanese administrative system.

On 7 February 1943, Field-Marshal Wavell reviewed the brigade. This visit gave great encouragement to all ranks. Before leaving, the Field-Marshal gave a brief message: "This is a great adventure. It is not going to be an easy one. I wish you all the very best of luck." Then the Commander-in-Chief saluted the brigade as a gesture of respect, which was much appreciated. "It was an acknowledgement that this was one of the most dangerous ventures yet undertaken by the Allies."<sup>4</sup>

#### THE MARCH BEGINS

The brigade marched from Imphal into Burma on 8 February 1943. Each column had its own machine-guns and mortars and was

<sup>2</sup> Wavell's *Despatch*, *op. cit.*, page 6.

<sup>3</sup> Wingate's *Report*, page 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 40.



self-contained as regards pack transport. They had, however, no artillery, and supply was mostly by air and occasionally by local purchase if it was found feasible.

The problem which the brigade had to tackle was that of getting some 3000 men and 1000 animals organised in eight columns through the IV Corps front, across the Chindwin river, over the north and south escarpment which lies west of the line joining Pinbon to Pinlebu, then through the very limited number of defiles to the east of the railway. It was a distance of about 150 miles through Japanese occupied territory and had to be done without interception. To successfully achieve this, it was necessary that the Japanese should make a wrong appreciation of the intentions of the brigade in the first instance. A simple plan was made to induce the Japanese to believe that the brigade was operating on the east flank of the 23rd Indian Division, against the Kalewa position. No. 1 Group, consisting of a Headquarters and Nos. 1 and 2 Gurkha Rifle Columns was to cross the Chindwin at Auktaung, south of the Sittaung, just sufficiently ahead of the main force to enable the latter to take full advantage of the Japanese misappreciation. Major Jeffries, commanding 142 Company, was selected officer-in-charge of deception. He wore a brigadier's insignia and was attached with a small headquarters to No. 1 Group. This deception worked well in practice and the Japanese were convinced that Wingate himself was leading No. 1 Group.

At the same time, the IV Corps arranged that the 23rd Indian Division should stage a raid on the west bank of the Chindwin, towards Kalewa, to convince the Japanese of the genuineness of the threat to the south. The 23rd Indian Division at the same time detailed the Patiala Light Infantry and one battery of 3.7 Hows. to help No. 1 Group cross the Chindwin at Auktaung, which was executed without opposition.

Once across the Chindwin river, No. 1 Group had instructions to move secretly over the mountains to the east, proceeded quickly to attack the railway near Kyaikthin while passing and then cross the Irrawaddy near Tagaung. The final objective of the force was the highland near Mongmit, where it had to await the arrival of the main body of the brigade or further instructions. This meant a difficult march of approximately 250 miles through the Japanese-occupied territory, a very risky assignment for a force consisting of about 1000 men and 250 animals. The group, however, carried this out to the letter, though there occurred some unfortunate delay in its time-table, which led to rather serious consequences later. Supply-dropping for this Group was to be done by day so as to attract the attention of the Japanese; otherwise, the normal practice was to drop supplies at night. The deception was entirely



successful and enabled the main body of the force to cross the Chindwin without opposition at Tonhe.

While No. 1 Group was scheduled to perform this deception, Wingate planned that the main body of the force under him should cross the Chindwin at Tonhe unobserved. To conceal the movements of the various columns, No. 1 Group was so to mingle with the main movement, as far as Tamu, as to be confused therewith. In the meantime, the main or northern movement was to fade out piecemeal, short of Tamu, to reappear only some miles further on the road to Tonhe.

The crossing of the Chindwin, it was considered, would be a critical lap in the movement of the northern force. There was a great risk of interception by the Japanese during the lengthy crossing of the river by five columns, but the deception, aided by daylight supply-dropping to draw attention to the southern thrust, seems to have succeeded and, although the Japanese were in some force near Sanda, only a few miles south of Tonhe, and were carrying out their usual patrols along the east bank, they appear to have known nothing of the move of the main force until it was safely across.

Brigadier Wingate planned to attack the railway near Indaw soon after crossing the Chindwin, and the columns earmarked to inflict the most damage to the Japanese lines of communication were Nos. 3 and 5, commanded by Majors Calvert and Fergusson, respectively. The columns marched by night so as to avoid their movements being observed by Japanese patrols on the east bank of the Chindwin. The advance column consisted of the headquarters of the 2nd Burma Rifles led by Lt. Col. Wheeler, a regular army officer in his late forties. "Stoutish but durable as a tank, he had an even disposition that nothing could ruffle; and remained calm and collected in the tightest corner. The men—British, Indian and Burmese—loved and respected him."<sup>5</sup> Flight-Lieutenant Thompson of the Royal Air Force was with him and he was responsible for the column's wireless communications with the air base and Agartala. He was a linguist and spoke Chinese and Malay fluently.

Lt.-Col. Wheeler's group reached the end of the motor-road on 10 February from where it marched twenty miles up the Kabaw valley, which ran parallel to the Chindwin in a north-easterly direction. It successfully crossed the mountain range on February 11, and reached Tonhe on the left bank of the Chindwin on 13 February.

The same night the group crossed the Chindwin without opposition, being the first party of Wingate's men to do so. Patrols

<sup>5</sup> *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 47.



were sent out to reconnoitre the east bank up- and downstream, which reported to Brigadier Wingate that there were no Japanese in the neighbourhood.

As the various columns were crossing the Chindwin between 13 and 17 February 1943, Brigadier Wingate issued the following Order of the Day to his troops:—

"Today we stand on the threshold of a battle. The time of preparation is over, and we are moving on the enemy to prove ourselves and our methods. At this moment we stand beside the soldiers of the United Nations in the front line trenches throughout the world. It is always a minority that occupies the front line. It is a still smaller minority that accepts with a good heart tasks like this that we have chosen to carry out. We need not, therefore, as we go forward into the conflict, suspect ourselves of selfish or interested motives. We have all had the opportunity of withdrawing and we are here because we have chosen to be here, that is we have chosen to bear the burden and heat of the day. Men who make this choice are above the average in courage. We need therefore have no fear for the staunchness and guts of our comrades.

"The motive which has led each and all of us to devote ourselves to what lies ahead cannot conceivably have been a bad motive. Comfort and security are not sacrificed voluntarily for the sake of others by ill disposed people. Our motive, therefore, may be taken to be the desire to serve our day and generation in the way that seems nearest to our hand. The battle is not always to the strong nor the race to the swift. Victory in war cannot be counted upon, but what can be counted upon is that we shall go forward determined to do what we can to bring this war to the end which we believe best for our friends and comrades in arms, without boastfulness or forgetting our duty, resolved to do the right so far as we can see the right.

"Our aim is to make possible a government of the world in which all men can live at peace and with equal opportunity of service.

"Finally, knowing the vanity of man's effort and the confusion of his purpose, let us pray that God may accept our services and direct our endeavours, so that when we shall have done all we shall see the fruit of our labours and be satisfied."

The whole of the northern force soon crossed over and reached the small village of Myene by 18 February, where supply-dropping was completed during the nights of 15-18th. At this time of the year, the Chindwin was still high; and crossing at Tonhe entailed traversing fully 400 yards of fast-flowing stream, and it was found



that the power-line on which calculations had been based during training at Saugor could not be established. Great difficulty and delay therefore occurred in getting the large force with its animals and heavy stores across.

The northern force consisted of the following elements:

(1) Brigade Headquarters	...	...	250	all ranks
(2) Burma Rifles Headquarters	...	...	150	" "
(3) Headquarters 2 Group	...	...	120	" "
(4) 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 columns	...	...	1,680	" "
Total			2,200	

In addition to this, there were 850 animals.

In the meantime, the southern force (some 1,000 men and 250 animals) had crossed at Auktaung on 14-15 February and was quickly on its move towards Tanga with six days' supplies after two successful supply-droppings on the 13th and 14th. Brigadier Wingate has recorded that the daylight supply-droppings at Auktaung on 13 and 14 February were "highly successful".<sup>6</sup> The area for the dropping was skilfully selected, and no attempt was made at concealment since the deliberate purpose of the southern force was to draw Japanese attention to its activities. The force had to wait till 26 February for another supply-dropping. This unusually long interval was decided upon since it was anticipated that troops would take some time to cross the mountains and enter the plain of Shwebo. So the force had to march for 11 days on 6 days' hard-scale rations. On this occasion, statchutes were found to be quite satisfactory and it began to be fully realised by troops that every particle of dropping equipment, rope, cloth etc. was invaluable to the columns and should not be wasted. Only a very small proportion of this was damaged.

Initially, the airmen were less skilled and the troops less adept at spotting and retrieving distant statchutes, and a fair proportion of the stores was lost or collected by the more watchful Burmese. Subsequently, however, being short of rations soon sharpened the wits of the troops and they became adept in the matter of retrieving distant statchutes.

#### *Northern Force (18 February—1 March 1943)*

Without waiting for rations, Headquarters 2 Burma Rifles (10 officers and 110 Burmese troops) with bullock transport pushed ahead and reached the area Tonmakeng-Sinlamaung on 18 February. Unluckily their wireless transmission set failed, but Lieut. Toye, accompanied only by his orderly, executed a remarkable ride of fifty miles

<sup>6</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 16.



in sixteen hours through jungle in an area patrolled by the Japanese, and brought news to the brigade about Japanese activities. He reported that various Japanese patrols were moving on Homalin from Tonmakeng, while 200 troops were occupying Sinlamaung which had been found unoccupied a month earlier by an Allied reconnoitering party.

At this time, it would appear that the Japanese had not heard of the crossing of the Chindwin by the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade and were themselves intending to infiltrate across the river. Subsequently on hearing of the brigade's having crossed in large numbers, the Japanese in a panic withdrew all patrols fanwise to the Chaunggyi or Mu valleys, and the garrison stationed at Sinlamaung evacuated the place hurriedly on 24 February.

Meanwhile, the five columns were marching through forest and marsh towards Tonmakeng. While the columns were moving, a report was received of the presence of a Japanese patrol two hundred strong in Metkalet village, some five miles to the south of Tonzi. Calvert's and Fergusson's columns obtained Brigadier Wingate's permission to give chase. However, before the columns could reach the village, it was learnt that the Japanese had pushed off to the south in a great hurry. The columns were therefore asked to join the brigade at Tonmakeng; which it reached after six days of marching, owing mainly to the bad sodden going and the inexperience of officers in march discipline and administration.<sup>7</sup> The average distance covered in a day was not more than ten miles as against the anticipated fifteen miles a day.

Tonmakeng on the Nam Saga occupied a position of strategic importance since most of the important north-south tracks passed through it. The columns at this stage were in need of a supply-dropping, and since the country beyond was unsuitable for this purpose, it was decided to have a large supply-drop at Tonmakeng to enable the brigade to reach the railway without further need of supplies. The success of this supply-drop in the heart of Japanese occupied territory had an extremely beneficial effect on the morale of the troops.

To test the methods of the troops, cover the supply-dropping and obtain information about the Japanese, Wingate met all the column commanders near Tonmakeng on 23 February and ordered columns 3, 7 and 8 to attack Sinlamaung immediately, the garrison of which was estimated to be about three hundred. The combined force was led by Lieut.-Colonel Sam Cooke. As anticipated, the Japanese had bolted away from Sinlamaung a few hours before the arrival of Cooke's troops but the manoeuvre provided some useful

<sup>7</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 18.



lessons. The columns, deprived of their prey, consoled themselves by destroying a large rice dump and other stores, and burning some hutments which the Japanese had constructed for monsoon quarters. At this point they picked up a wireless message from Brigadier Wingate saying, "Fear you are on wild-goose chase", and ordering them to push forward to a rendezvous on the west side of the escarpment.

The brigade moved towards the next stage and after an easy march crossed the mountains on 1 March, dropped down the escarpment into the Chaunggyi valley, crossed the Namkasa and Namkadin rivers and bivouacked near Pinbon. Thereafter, finding Pinbon and its neighbourhood strongly held and patrolled by the Japanese, Brigadier Wingate ordered No. 4 Column to ambush the Pinlebu—Mansi motor-road and seek to by-pass Pinbon through the mountains. On 2 March, No. 5 Column was also ordered to move on to the strategic Bon Chaung Railway Gorge *via* Mankat, blow the bridges and bring down the cliff. As the Mankat defile offered one of the most favourable lines of approach, Major Fergusson was also ordered to inform the brigade headquarters if it was held or likely to be held by the Japanese. The column after halting at the village Sakhan and a place about three miles from Taungaw, passed through the valley, which the troops styled the 'Happy Valley' and reached the Mankat Pass, which was not occupied by the Japanese.

### 2—3 March 1943

Subsequently, Brigadier Wingate marched his whole force, less No. 4 column, boldly down the Pinbon—Pinlebu motor-road between the dawn of 2 March and that of 3 March, as it was considered essential to pass the Mu valley before any threat developed from the nearby Japanese posts which had the whole area well reconnoitered. The force had good road-block parties in front and rear, while No. 7 Column blew all the bridges behind, thereby cutting off all chances of a follow-up by the Japanese forces. Moreover, pouring rain quickly rendered the road impassable to mechanical transport. As an additional precaution, Brigadier Wingate had made prior arrangements for rapid dispersal, if need be, and reassembly at an operational rendezvous some ten miles ahead on the Nam Maw river.

On 3 March the brigade reached Didauk. On that date the position of its component groups was as follows:

- (1) No. 1 Group had almost reached the railway near Kyaikthin, roughly forty miles to the south of brigade headquarters. The advance of this group coupled with the investment of Pinbon and Pinlebu strengthened the Japanese belief that the brigade's objective was Pinlebu.



- (2) Nos. 3 and 5 Columns were three days from the railway heading for Wuntho and the Bon Chaung respectively. The Japanese had failed to detect their advance.
- (3) No. 8 column was about to attack Japanese dispositions at Pinlebu.
- (4) No. 4 column was active in the Pinbon area.

Meanwhile the Japanese were also not inactive. They were reinforcing Pinbon through Banmauk and Pinlebu *via* Wuntho. The Royal Air Force bombed the last two places with a view to disrupting Japanese plans. Thus the stage was set for the attack on the railway and advance further east.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Misfortune of No. 4 Column*

No. 4 Column, whose role was to make diversionary attacks at Pinbon and which had been ordered to form an ambush on the Pinlebu—Mansi Road by Brigadier Wingate, carried out vigorous reconnaissance in the area on 2 and 3 March, occasionally coming into conflict with the Japanese patrols. The column had been ordered to by-pass Pinbon to the east, not later than March 4, as the object of Brigadier Wingate at the time was to move on Indaw. But this plan had to be abandoned as no report was received from No. 5 Column about the Mankat Pass route being clear. Alternatively, as No. 4 Column reported that the Kaingmakhan route was clear of the Japanese, Brigadier Wingate decided to march on Wuntho, instead of on Indaw, and asked No. 4 Column to rejoin the main force. Accordingly the column started out to do this on 4 March, but early that morning it met a superior Japanese force near Nyaungwun which blocked its movement. In the fighting that followed, the column was nearly overwhelmed, and after repeated attempts to rally and counter-attack, the column commander ordered his troops to disperse and collect again at his previously arranged operational rendezvous. By adopting these tactics, the majority of the troops were saved, but the column lost its cipher in a panic as also much indispensable equipment. Having been separated from the brigade group by strong Japanese forces, the column commander wisely decided not to risk the safety of his troops any longer and marched back to the Chindwin.

#### *Disaster to No. 2 Column*

After receiving a supply-drop at Yeshin towards the close of February, No. 1 Group marched off the railway, and on the night of 2 March, No. 2 Column formed up at the foot of a hill in thin jungle, three miles off Kyaikthin. But the column commander had

<sup>8</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 19.



made the fatal mistake of marching in broad daylight from the sixth milestone towards Kyaikthin. Hence the Japanese were able to learn of the movement of this force and decided to attack it. They brought up an infantry company from Wuntho and ambushed the column when it started to file out at 2130 hours to cut the railway. The Japanese used mortars and the firing was so intense that the commander of No. 2 Column could not rally his men properly. Towards the end of the fight, the column commander erred in changing his operational rendezvous to the rear where he hoped to reorganise his men for a fresh assault. This order reached very few of his troops. Some parties went forward and continued their march to the Irrawaddy, hoping to contact other columns there. The majority, under Major Emmett found themselves cut off and with most of the animals killed or missing, their wireless set lost and the bulk of the equipment gone, the force retreated in disorder to the Chindwin.

All the ciphers of No. 1 Group and No. 2 Column were lost in the encounter and Wingate's insignia of brigadier fell into the hands of the Japanese which made them believe that they had destroyed the main force. They dropped printed sheets to this effect on No. 5 Column as it was crossing the Irrawaddy at Tigyaing a week later.

The engagement at Kyaikthin was definitely a reverse for the brigade. The losses in animals and equipment were considerable and the loss in personnel was heavy. Nevertheless No. 1 Group remained together as a fighting body and later successfully crossed the Irrawaddy at Tagaung.

Brigadier Wingate had rightly expressed the opinion that "the disaster that happened to No. 2 Column was easily avoidable and would never have taken place had the commander concerned understood the doctrines of penetration".<sup>a</sup>

#### BLOWING UP THE RAILWAY

It has been narrated earlier that the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade had, as its main objective, the disruption of the railway, which was the chief line of communication for the Japanese. The brigade had divided itself into columns, and early in March two columns, Nos. 2 and 4, had suffered disastrous reverses, and were separated from it. Brigadier Wingate had, however, assigned the actual task of demolition of the railway to columns 3 and 5, commanded respectively by Majors Calvert and Fergusson. The latter had moved up the "Happy Valley" and was heading on towards the strategic Bon

<sup>a</sup> Wingate's Report, p. 20.



Chaung railway gorge. The other column, commanded by Major Calvert, after leaving Sinlamaung had followed the road towards Wuntho and was pushing straight for the railway. On 5 March, it reached a point west of Gangaw, when it received a message from the brigade headquarters directing the column to attack the railway and choose the spot for its thrust. Major Calvert had no idea of the target of the other column, but decided to launch the attack in the vicinity of Nankan, where the map showed there were some bridges. He asked for Royal Air Force support to bomb Wuntho on 7 March, as also Katha and Naba, and laid charges.

The next day No. 3 Column marched to a point two miles north-west of Nankan and a patrol of Burma Rifles was sent to reconnoitre the railway station, Nankan and the neighbouring village. The railway station, situated in a small area of open ground, was found completely deserted, but the Japanese were based in some strength at Indaw, twenty-five miles to the north, and at Wuntho, ten miles to the south-west. The new motor-road from Indaw to Wuntho cut across the railway line just near Nankan station. The reconnaissance further revealed that some Japanese troops had gone by the motor-road north to Indaw the preceding day and that a train had passed through the previous night. "This was a most useful and bold reconnaissance by Lieut. Gourlay and accounted much for the success of the operation."<sup>10</sup>

Major Calvert's plan was to send one demolition party consisting of one platoon, supported by a medium machine-gun and mortar, to blow a bridge near milestone 561; another party of the same strength commanded by Major Calvert himself was sent to milestone 555, while one under Subedar Kum Singh Gurung of the Gurkha Rifles was detailed to watch the motor-road to the north. A section of the Burma Rifles was detailed to lay an ambush on the northern stretch of the motor-road while the railway line was being blown by the two demolition parties. Another party was stationed on both sides of the motor-road, two miles south of Nankan station, to hold off a Japanese attack from Wuntho. It was armed with an anti-tank rifle, a Bren gun and mines. Major Calvert dropped off Corporal Day and one man from his party to blow a small girder bridge. Another party went south from Nankan blowing the lines at intervals of 100 yards and successfully destroyed the bridge, one span and abutment, at milestone 555. Major Calvert's own party, after a brisk march of four miles down the line, came to the bridge at milestone 561. They found that the bridge exceeded their expectations, both as regards size and height, and preparing "blows",

<sup>10</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 22.



therefore, took longer than originally expected. The work of demolition started at 1500 hours when firing was heard at a distance up the line. An hour later, a message was received by Major Calvert from Captain Griffiths that he had ambushed two lorry loads of the Japanese and was holding them. He asked for reinforcements. After staying to see the bridge successfully blown, and leaving the company sergeant-major to attack the abutments and lay booby-traps and delayed action charges, Major Calvert rushed to the help of Captain Griffith's party with two sections of the platoon, the mortar and medium machine-gun and half a section of Burma Rifles. On its way, Major Calvert's party bumped into two platoons of No. 7 Column led by Captain Peterson, "the fighting Dane". The latter was given a clear picture of the situation and was told that Major Calvert and his men were going to clear up the village. The party advanced in open formation on either side of the line, and a position was ultimately taken up on the line from where it could open fire against the Japanese forces.

### *The Battle of Nankan*

By the time Major Calvert reached the village, fighting had been going on with the Japanese for some time. Kum Singh Gurung's ambush party had been the first to draw blood. The first burst of fire from his anti-tank rifle killed half a dozen Japanese as they jumped out of the trucks. But Kum Singh's party found itself heavily outnumbered. He knew that it was vital to stop the Japanese so that the work of the demolition parties might not be jeopardised, and immediately sent a runner back to Captain Griffiths for reinforcements. Griffiths with his men joined Kum Singh immediately and informed Calvert about the position. The ground was held against determined attacks by the Japanese throughout the afternoon, and about 1530 hours the party heard a series of terrific explosions as Calvert and Silcock detonated their charges on the railway. The railway line had been cut in at as many as seventy places and three bridges were complete shambles. Soon afterwards, with the arrival of Calvert and Peterson, the position at the Nankan village was stabilised. Meanwhile the Japanese had also received reinforcements. In the fighting that ensued, the Japanese broke and fled northward into the jungle, leaving behind a pile of dead.

After the action Major Calvert ordered all his troops to go to the rendezvous near Chaunggyi where they stopped for food and tea. By the morning of 7 March, all men had turned up. They had inflicted no less than fifty casualties and destroyed three motor-trucks. Captain Griffiths and Subedar Kum Singh had fought an excellent engagement. The Subedar was later awarded the Indian



Distinguished Medal for the skill and courage with which his men had covered the demolitions on the railway.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, Captain Silcock had reported back to column headquarters. He had a fine, uninterrupted time, blowing bridges and culverts and removing chunks off the rails. Booby-traps were left along clear sections of the railway line and also on the road.

#### *Action of Column No. 5*

In the scheme of demolition of the railway, Brigadier Wingate had given the job of blowing the strategic Bon Chaung Gorge bridge to No. 5 Column. This column had marched approximately 300 miles from the base without any long halt before it struck at the railway. The last sixty miles of the march through jungle and hills were covered in less than three days. Since the Japanese were not supposed to be in any strength in the area, Major Fergusson was confident that he would not have to face much opposition in his work. He, therefore, decided to carry out his task by daylight instead of by night.

On the morning of 6 March, this column was divided as follows:

- (a) Lieut. Jim Harman with half the Commando squad and one rifle platoon was assigned the task of blowing the gorge and bringing it down on the railway.
- (b) A party under Captain Roberts was asked to proceed to Nankan to keep in check the Japanese garrison there.
- (c) 5 Platoon, 2 Burma Rifles, under Captain Fraser, less one officer and ten men, was to cross the railway and proceed south-east to Tigyaing on the Irrawaddy, which was marked on the map as a steamer-station. He was to report to No. 5 Column whether the Irrawaddy could be safely crossed at Tigyaing, and, if so, to make all arrangements for a crossing on 9 March.
- (d) The remainder of the column was to march to Bon Chaung to demolish the railway bridge at the station. A party under Captain Macdonald was to proceed direct to secure bivouac 4 or 5 miles beyond the railway and wait for the rest to join there.

Captain Fraser's party proceeded towards Tigyaing at about 0600 hours on 6 March. Captain Robert's and Lieut. Harman's parties left at 1130 hours and the main body of the column under Major Fergusson followed them an hour later. Before the last group had proceeded half a mile, they received news that Captain Robert's party had been engaged by a Japanese force at the village

<sup>11</sup> *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 77.



of Kyaukin and that a lot of shooting was going on. The detachment under Major Fergusson quickened the pace, and as they drew near the village, they found everything quiet except for fire from one Japanese light machine-gun. This fire soon ceased and the dead body of the gunner was discovered half an hour later. The Japanese party of 17 was apparently liquidated with the solitary exception of one man, who drove away in the lorry.

Thereafter Major Fergusson's men reached the railway station of Bon Chaung at 1700 hours after a march through bad country, and found that the main column had already arrived there an hour earlier. The work of laying charges was in full swing; these were finally laid along 140 feet of the bridge and further on in the cliff-side overhanging the railway. At 2100 hours, the bridge was blown and the explosion was heard by Major Calvert's men ten miles to the south. Major Fergusson has described it vividly:

"Then came the bang. The mules plunged and kicked, the hills for miles around rolled the noise of it about their hollows and flung it to their neighbours. Mike Calvert and John Fraser heard it away in their distant bivouacs . . . and just as we were going into bivouac we heard another great explosion, and knew that Jim Harman had blown the gorge".<sup>12</sup>

As fragments of the bridge were being thrown up in all directions, Major Fergusson exclaimed happily, "All my life I've wanted to blow up bridges".

#### *Action of Column No. 1*

To complete the narrative of the blowing of the railway, it is necessary at this stage to refer to the action of No. 1 Group at Kyaik-thin, forty miles south of Nankan on the railway. The disaster to No. 2 Column has been mentioned earlier. Undeterred by this reverse, the remainder of the force crept down to the railway on the night of 2/3 March in small parties in accordance with pre-arranged plans. At 0300 hours there was a sharp explosion, followed by two more. A bridge was blown, the railway cut at five points and a number of mines laid before the troops assembled at a place a few miles from the railway line and pushed on eastwards towards the Irrawaddy.

The blowing of the railway was carried out almost according to plan, and the attack, in the words of the Brigade Commander, had been "well and truly delivered" but the fighting qualities of some of the troops left much to be desired. Brigadier Wingate had succeeded in two of his main objects. The Japanese main line of communications had been severed, and his troops had helped to relieve

<sup>12</sup> *Beyond the Chindwin*, p. 74.



the pressure on the Kachin Levies to the north by drawing Japanese troops to the south. The Japanese were forced to rearrange their order of battle and by the middle of March the greater part of the Japanese force, whose normal role was to face west, was distributed on both banks of the Irrawaddy from Tagaung to Katha.

*6 to 11 March 1943*

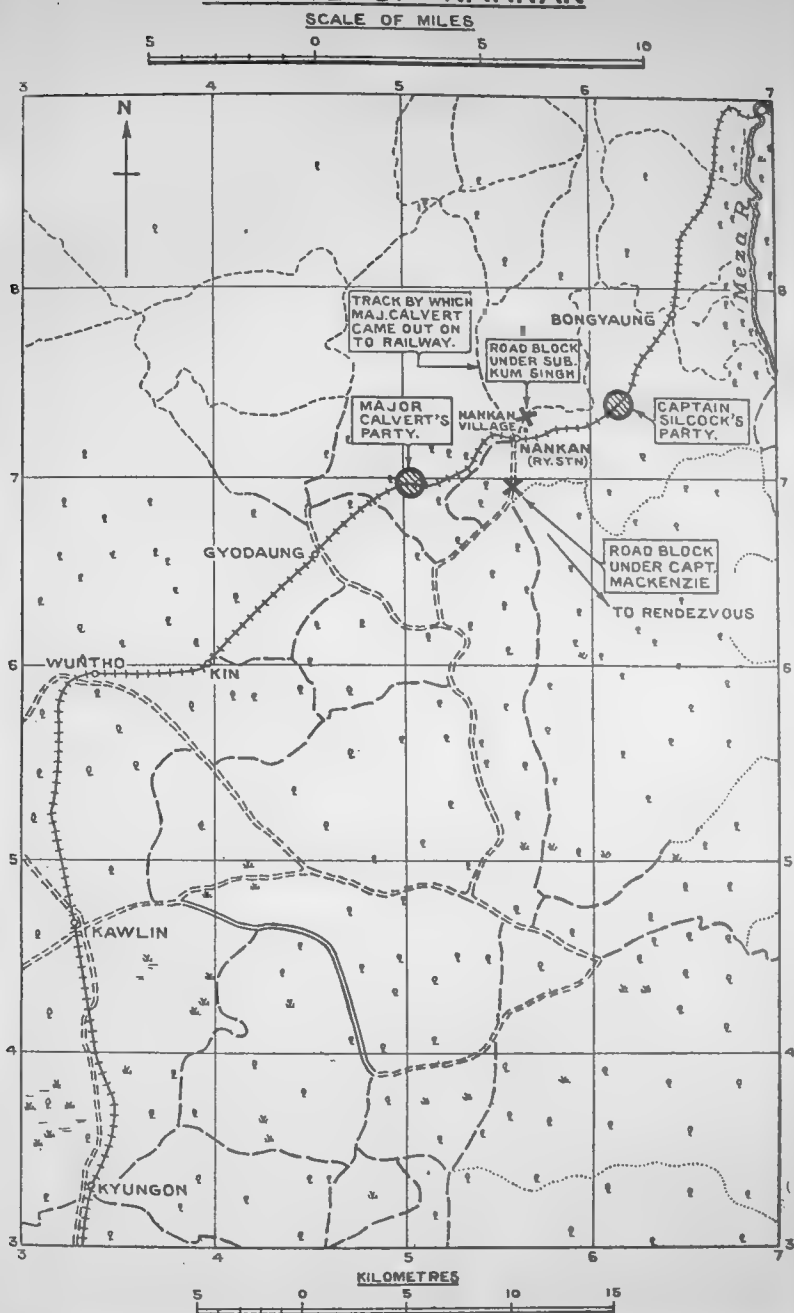
While Majors Calvert and Fergusson had been carrying out the demolitions, Brigadier Wingate had stayed at Banbwe Taung overlooking the railway at Kyunbin, some miles north of Nankan. During these fateful days, he was in a quandary as to his future plans, because of the lack of news of No. 1 Group (for several days, he was doubtful if it were still in the field), and the disaster to No. 4 Column. He was not sure whether Nos. 3 and 5 Columns "could come back into harbour without undue risk".

Just when things were in a suspense, Brigadier Wingate received two items of news that decided him to adhere to his original plan of crossing the Irrawaddy. Firstly, that the greater part of No. 1 Group was intact and, after a long delay, had just completed the crossing of the Irrawaddy at Tagaung. Secondly, a remarkable written record of Major Calvert's achievements was brought across country after an astounding series of adventures by Captain Peterson, M. C.

No. 3 Column received a message from brigade headquarters on 8 March asking it to join up with the main party, but Major Calvert asked for permission to push across the Irrawaddy. Brigadier Wingate agreed, and passed back the news that Major Fergusson was also set for crossing the Irrawaddy and that the two columns could join up and carry out combined operations. Both the column commanders had reason to believe that the Irrawaddy would be crossed unopposed if the crossings were executed simultaneously and immediately.



# BATTLE OF NANKAN





## CHAPTER VII

# The Irrawaddy and Beyond

### CROSSING THE IRRAWADDY

After blowing the railway, Major Calvert, who, along with Major Fergusson, had been permitted by Brigadier Wingate to take his column across the Irrawaddy, marched from the railway to the Meza river on 10 March. Before moving, a false bivouac was laid by the column in case the Japanese were around. A good supply-dropping place was located in a paddy-field on the west bank of the river at Dhobin and a supply-drop arranged for 11 March, as the troops were badly in need of rations. The supply-drop was successfully completed in less than half an hour. "It was extraordinarily pretty to watch", Thompson said later. With six days' rations from the droppings the one thing essential was to keep the movements of the column secret from the Japanese. It was necessary to have twenty-four hours without Japanese interference if the Irrawaddy was to be successfully crossed. But their luck was out. One patrol reported that the Japanese were camped in force at Tawma, a village very near the column's line of march to the Irrawaddy. Major Calvert tried secretly to by-pass Tawma without arousing Japanese suspicions, but a Burma Rifleman was detected by the Japanese in a village east of Tawma, and got a bullet through his water-bottle. The Japanese pursued the column, which had to push ahead at great speed, laying booby-traps on its trail. This excellent practice prevented the column from being pinned down by superior Japanese forces, and it reached the neighbourhood of Nyaungbintha having inflicted more damage than it received.

But the Japanese were hot on the trail and it was becoming apparent that sooner or later they would catch up with Major Calvert's column. Patrols sent forward to select a suitable place for crossing the Irrawaddy came back with reports of heavy Japanese concentrations and patrols all over the area. Therefore, Major Calvert decided to attempt a crossing on 13 March, if possible, and set off on horseback for the river to make necessary arrangements.

Early on the morning of 13 March the column found itself on a small island with an area of nearly four square miles separated from the west bank of the river by a narrow channel. Here they were attacked by the Japanese using 2" mortars and machine-guns. The Japanese secured the initial advantage of surprise, but Major Calvert's rearguard troops, detailed to keep a sharp watch on the



west bank of the channel, quickly returned the Japanese fire, causing casualties. The Japanese thereupon retreated and withdrew out of range and Major Calvert decided to take his troops across before the former could regroup. "We've got to cross twelve hundred yards of Irrawaddy", he said grimly, "and we've got to do it before they can bring up more troops." By noon, the column had started crossing, while a small force remained behind to hold off any attack. It not only succeeded in holding the Japanese, but actually pushed them back while the rest of the column completed the crossing, and in its turn it managed to get across the river safely. The column crossed after a stiff skirmish, suffering some casualties and losing a large number of animals and some equipment. In spite of the losses suffered by the column, it remained a fighting force, quite capable of carrying out the projected operation against the Gokteik bridge. The morning after the crossing was over, three Japanese bombers attacked its old bivouac, which still contained some abandoned mules and equipment. Brigadier Wingate has recorded: "The successful crossing of No. 3 Column in the face of this attack reflects great credit on its Commander and officers."

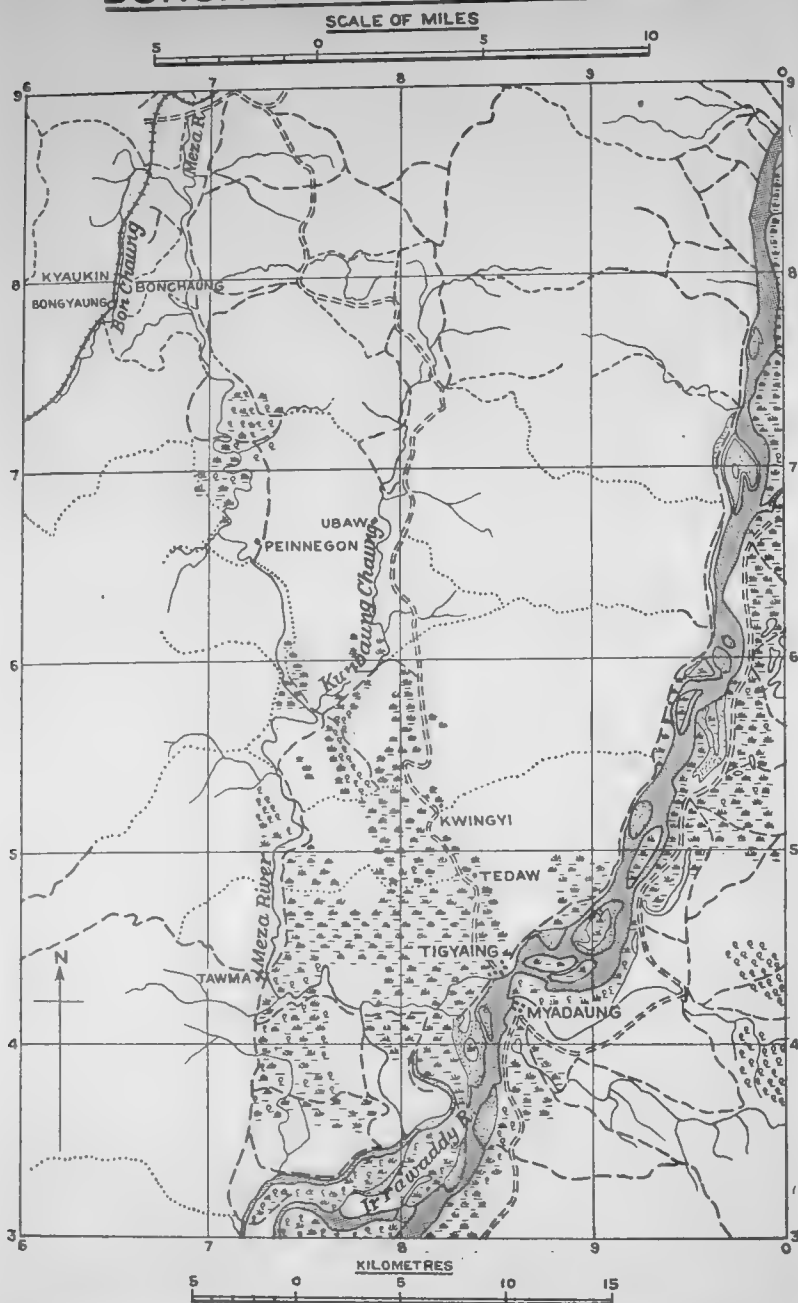
#### *Crossing of No. 5 Column—10 March*

We may now turn to No. 5 Column. By 9 March, Major Fergusson's men had assembled near the Irrawaddy in a bivouac selected by the advance party near Tigyaing, the inhabitants of which warmly welcomed the Allied troops. Patrols reported that there were no Japanese troops at or in the neighbourhood of Tigyaing from where the column wanted to cross over to the other bank of the river. If successful in crossing the Irrawaddy, Major Fergusson planned to march for the Shweli bridge on the road running up to Bhamo. If this was to be blown, it was thought Myitkyina would be completely isolated.

Like Major Calvert's column, Major Fergusson's men were badly in need of rations and the food problem was getting acute. In the past fifteen days they had with them rations only for a week. The column was lucky in being able to purchase food from Burmese villagers. At this time a Japanese reconnaissance plane dropped leaflets to the effect that British troops had been defeated in a great battle at Kyaikthin. The "Commander-in-Chief" had been captured and the remnants of the force had been forced to retrace their steps. The Japanese obviously knew the whereabouts of the column, otherwise they would not have bothered about dropping leaflets.

At Tigyaing, the Irrawaddy was about three-fourths of a mile wide, "a broad seemingly sluggish stretch of water with a lovely, dull brown sheen". Just as the men were ferrying across in boats, Major Fergusson got news that a Japanese force, about three hundred strong,



**BONCHAUNG-TIGYAING AREA**



was only eight miles away at the village of Tawma. This news was disturbing as it was essential to have an undisputed crossing. The question was how quickly the Japanese could reach Tigyaing. Major Fergusson thought that the extensive tracts of marsh between Tawma and Tigyaing would sufficiently delay the Japanese to enable the column to cross over to the eastern bank. Subsequent events showed that he was right. As the last boat carrying him was in mid-stream, the Japanese reached the place and started firing. Luckily, no one was injured, and the troops were safely across.

On the east bank the column unfortunately missed a supply-drop narrowly on 12 March. When the troops were within a mile of the dropping field and before they had time to light signal fires, they saw the planes circle round and turn back for India. Another supply-drop was arranged for 14 March, and this proved successful. Troops received five days' ration and there was fodder for the animals for the same duration. The night was "one of the happiest" and for the first time in several weeks troops went to sleep with full stomachs and calm minds.

#### *Crossing of No. 1 Group*

No. 1 Group, consisting of the parties of Majors Dunlop and Jeffries, plus the remnants of No. 2 Column which had a fight with the Japanese at Kyaikthin on 2 March, crossed the Irrawaddy without interference at Tagaung, eight miles to the south of Major Calvert's column, on 9 March. The Group was several days behind its original schedule. It could have easily reached the Irrawaddy in two days by following known tracks, but since it did not want to have the Japanese on its heels, it marched through jungle and hit "an appalling stretch" which slowed down its progress to only five or six miles a day. The delay was fortunate for the other columns, inasmuch as it prevented the Japanese from guessing Brigadier Wingate's intention of crossing the Irrawaddy until that date.

The Group received a supply-drop on the east bank of the Irrawaddy on 11 March, and another three days later. It joined Major Calvert's column on 15 March and the officers from both columns met to compare notes.

#### *Crossing by the Brigade Group*

While Fergusson's and Calvert's columns, and No. 1 Group were crossing the Irrawaddy, Brigadier Wingate with his headquarters and Nos. 7 and 8 Columns was awaiting news at Banbwe Taung, overlooking the railway at Kyunbin, to the north of Nankan, which might enable him to take a final decision about crossing the Irrawaddy. He utilised this interval to organise a guerilla reconnaissance of Wuntho. In the light of experience gained by this method,



Brigadier Wingate came to the conclusion that such reconnaissance must be the normal prelude to attack. The party consisted of two British officers and men from the Burma Rifles Headquarters. They were able to secure a position on a hill overlooking the town, within a mile and a half of the railway station. Here they remained for a period of thirty-six hours and at intervals of six hours sent reports to the brigade headquarters containing detailed accounts of Japanese concentrations and reinforcements in Wuntho. These details were in turn passed on to the Royal Air Force base at Agartala which bombed strategic positions actually occupied by the Japanese troops. Brigadier Wingate himself was intending to attack the town when news came of the crossing of the Irrawaddy by a major portion of his troops. He, therefore, abandoned the attack against Wuntho and decided to follow the bulk of his troops across the Irrawaddy.

### *Supply-dropping at Kyunbin*

Brigadier Wingate had arranged with the Royal Air Force for a supply-drop at Kyunbin on 13 March, but the Japanese in the meantime had known about the brigade's presence at Banbwe Taung and had posted troops in the Kyunbin area. A Japanese party, on the evening of 12 March, had accidentally encountered Peterson's platoons on their way to rejoin the brigade and opened mortar fire against them. Brigadier Wingate, on hearing this, immediately sent a message through the IV Corps to the Royal Air Force base that supply-dropping should not take place until he gave an all-clear signal. But this was not acted upon due to some unknown reason.

The brush with Peterson's troops warned the Japanese in time and they prepared a defensive position around Kyunbin to guard against any counter-attack by the brigade. On the morning of 13 March, Nos. 7 and 8 Column Battle Groups, which were detailed to cover the supply-dropping area, ran into the Japanese defensive positions. Following Wingate's orders to attack the Japanese wherever found, the troops put in a vigorous enveloping attack but found the Japanese covering all the paddy-fields with automatic fire. Then followed confused fighting till late that evening, and the results were inconclusive. The brigade suffered three casualties, one killed and two wounded, and the Japanese also sustained a few losses. However, the supply-drop had to be cancelled but Lieut.-Colonel Wheeler and his men partly made up for it by purchasing supplies and forage in the village at the foot of the hill. Brigadier Wingate subsequently decided to leave the area and issued orders for a concentration at Nwalabo before making a dash for the Irrawaddy. The brigade was at this time about a hundred miles west of the river.

On arrival at Nwalabo, Brigadier Wingate held a conference of his commanders. He explained to them that the Japanese were most



likely to keep a close watch over the crossing places to the south used by the other columns. He felt that if the brigade kept well to the north and marched with speed, they would be able to cross the Irrawaddy unopposed. It was decided to move eastwards immediately. He relied on his own jungle-craft to lead the brigade group safely across.

Zibuygyin, to the east of the Meza river, was reached before first light on 16 March where a successful supply-drop took place. The Japanese were in force at Meza to the south, and a force of several hundred strong opened fire on the supply-dropping and neighbouring areas at about 1600 hours. But by this time the brigade had largely been withdrawn to a bivouac on the nearby mountains. Except for a small exchange of fire, no fighting took place.

Next day (17 March) the brigade group reached Hwelbo on the Irrawaddy and by 18 March all were across.

Hwelbo lay at the foot of a water course which ran due east through a gorge in the hills that separated the Irrawaddy and the Meza valleys. Both Nos. 3 and 5 Columns had utilised the gap in the mountains to reach the Irrawaddy. Because of the march of these two columns, the Japanese had brought more than a battalion into the Tigyaing Gap.

To avoid interference on the river, the brigade crossed the mountains to Hwelbo without following any beaten track with laden mules. The Japanese were taken completely by surprise. Luckily, the march proved less difficult than might be suspected and both troops and animals reached their destination without any mishap. Brigadier Wingate expected to meet a Japanese patrol at Hwelbo, but it had left the place the previous day. The crossing began at once, the whole village assisting the brigade. Peterson with a small party was one of the first to cross the Irrawaddy, followed quickly by headquarters and a Burma Rifles section. During the crossing some animals were lost, not by drowning, but through breaking back. The crossing of the troops was completed by daylight of 18 March. Fighter patrols from the Royal Air Force squadron at Imphal flew down the river the whole day keeping away possible Japanese launches.

Thus by 18 March all the columns of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, except Bromhead's which had remained in the Mu valley as rearguard and the section of No. 1 Group which had returned to India, had crossed the Irrawaddy with the major portion of their animals and all units more or less intact. In all about 2,200 men and 1000 animals had crossed both the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy without losing the power to fight and were now directed on Mongmit. Supply-dropping had proved an unqualified success testifying to the correctness of Brigadier Wingate's theories, and ciphers and wireless



transmission had proved adequate for the task. The attack on the railway had been successfully delivered. The Japanese interior economy had been seriously interrupted.

The various columns were concentrated within fifteen miles of each other instead of being stretched out in width and in depth. The Japanese, on their part, were able to concentrate around the base of the triangle formed by the Shweli and Irrawaddy rivers, and held a line roughly from Myitson on the Shweli, to Male on the Irrawaddy. All the columns were to the north of this line, with the two formidable barriers of the Shweli and the Irrawaddy cutting off their return to India. At this point the expedition was roughly "equidistant from Assam, Tibet and China".

#### BEYOND THE IRRAWADDY

With the successful crossing of the Irrawaddy by the various columns began the "second and more fruitful phase"<sup>1</sup> of the campaign. In an order of the day issued immediately after reaching Zibyugyin, Brigadier Wingate had assured his troops that in the country beyond the Irrawaddy they would meet friendly Burmese, but he did not fully realise that their march would be through a dry hot belt of forest, almost waterless, intersected by motor-roads heavily patrolled by the Japanese. The going beyond the river grew tough every day, and the troops were sometimes hard put to it to find their way.

Major Fergusson's column, after receiving a supply-drop containing five days' rations on 14 March, moved in a south-easterly direction rather leisurely because it was well ahead of the brigade. On 16 March the column was spotted by a Japanese reconnaissance plane. During the next week this plane dogged its steps but made no attempt to bomb the men. The march up to the Nam Mit was very trying and the column suffered a good deal due to scarcity of water. Moreover, "ants and flies worried them by day, mosquitoes at night and lice all the time." At this time, Major Fergusson got the news of the brigade's crossing the river and received orders to take his column to the Gokteik viaduct, and join Major Calvert's Column. The two columns were to be under the united command of Major Calvert, who was appointed local Lieut-Colonel. Calvert had always wanted to blow the Gokteik; he had prepared it for demolition in April 1942 and had sat on it for ten days awaiting the order to blow, but it had never come.

On 19 March, Fergusson's Column's intelligence reported that there were about seven hundred Japanese troops in Myitson, a village

<sup>1</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 29.



four miles to the east of its bivouac area where the Nam Mit joined the Shweli river. The news was passed on to Air Base, and R.A.F. bombers promptly carried out an air-raid on Myitson inflicting casualties on the Japanese and forcing them to take to the jungle. At the same time the column received a change of orders: it was asked to cover the advance of the brigade group instead of joining Calvert and was told that it would receive a supply-drop on 23 March. The supply problem was now serious, and because of continuous semi-starvation the troops were, physically speaking, only sixty per cent effective. On 20 March the column reached Bawbe Chaung and its commander received orders that the supply-drop was not to be held beyond the Nam Pan. The column had to retrace its steps to the Nam Pan where it reached late in the evening of 21 March. In the neighbourhood of the river it met No. 1 Group and exchanged much useful information.

The men were in a very weak state of health by the time the date of the supply-drop (23 March) arrived. Two planes dropped three days' rations at 1100 hours, although the column had asked for more. After the drop it received orders to march north to meet the brigade group at its rendezvous, a village one and a half miles west of Baw, and some five miles west of the Shweli.

Just before the supply-drop began, the column was joined by Major Jeffries and his party. Learning of the exact location of the brigade group, the latter left to join the brigade by a different route at 1500 hours. Fergusson's men left at 1700 hours in the direction of Baw, and on the morning of 24 March they were within ear-shot of what appeared to be a big battle. The next morning at 0700 hours, they rejoined the brigade after a lapse of twenty-six days at Hehtin Chaung. The first news that Fergusson received was momentous: the decision had been taken to return to India.

While Fergusson's Column was at Myitson, Calvert was six or seven miles away to the west of the place. After parting company with No. 1 Group on 18 March, Calvert decided to give his column the much-needed rest during which a large supply-drop was arranged. The next day three Hudsons flying in formation dropped their loads simultaneously and were followed at intervals by D.C.3s until a total of ten tons of supplies was dropped. This was "the biggest single dropping made to any column throughout the expedition".<sup>2</sup> The dropping was carried out with great precision. By the evening of 22 March, Calvert's Column, moving eastward, reached Pago on the Nam Mit river, which ran across their line of march to the next bivouac. Here, it received information that a patrol of sixty Japanese was in the village. Calvert detailed one party consisting of two

<sup>2</sup> *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 109.



Gurkha sections, and a British tommy-gun section to lay an ambush on one of the roads on which a Japanese patrol was advancing. The party had been in position barely an hour when they found a force of thirty-six Japanese approaching and immediately opened fire on them. The Japanese were caught unawares, and the first volley killed about twenty men. The remnants were soon after wiped out and not a single Japanese soldier escaped.

Hearing the sound of firing, other Japanese patrols cautiously moved towards the scene of action. In the fighting that followed Japanese suffered some casualties, while Calvert's casualties were three dead and two missing. Both combatants used every weapon in their possession, and, according to Brigadier Wingate, the superiority of British 3-inch mortar was established. At 1600 hours Calvert asked his men to break off the engagement, fearing that the Japanese would bring in more troops. They did so, but the column made a detour to the south-west to shake off the Japanese before crossing the Nam Mit. On 25 March, it contacted brigade headquarters and got a message from Brigadier Wingate to withdraw from Burma. At this point the column was within a hundred miles of the Burma Road.

While Nos. 3 and 5 Columns were finding great difficulty in locating safe bivouacs because of Japanese activities, No. 1 Group was slowly moving in a southerly direction towards the Nam Mit. The group had been asked to proceed as quickly as possible to Mongmit area, but instead it wasted valuable time until the orders were repeated. It bumped into Fergusson's Column, as already mentioned, on 23 March. Eventually on 25 March it crossed the Mongmit-Shwebo motor-road, sixteen days after crossing the Irrawaddy. This long delay upset the brigade group's time-table and enabled the Japanese to learn its intentions and to estimate correctly the strength of the Allied force. By noon of the same day the group joined the brigade, which was then making out plans for the return to India. The main object of the expedition had been achieved and only a month was left for the monsoon to begin, which breaks out earlier in Burma than in India.

The brigade group, meanwhile, after crossing the Irrawaddy, had moved in the direction of Baw, suffering intensely from heat and shortage of water like the other columns. To ease the pressure against the brigade group, Wingate arranged with the IV Corps Commander for bogus supply-droppings mainly between the Mongmit—Shwebo motor-road and the Mandalay—Lashio road. These droppings were successful and kept the Japanese in the dark for some time until Brigadier Wingate had reached in the neighbourhood of Baw, where a supply-drop in a stretch of open paddy-field was arranged for 24 March.



*The Battle of Baw*

Baw was a suitable place for supply-dropping. It was arranged to have the village securely held by troops and all approaches to and from Baw blocked. This foresight was, however, of no avail because of the failure of one of the parties to occupy its position on one of the two roads leading in from Mabein before it was light; another force, to make matters worse, entered into Baw itself by mistake, with a small road-block party which was not strong enough to hold any Japanese attack. The Japanese had enough time to man their defensive posts around the perimeter of the village in the jungle. The Allied party being greatly outnumbered started to withdraw, firing rifle grenades as it retreated. Brigadier Wingate reached the scene just before the supply-drop was scheduled to start. It could not take place in the paddy-field and efforts were quickly made to light indicator fires in the jungle. These fires had perforce to be lighted within a few hundred yards of the Japanese. Lt.-Col. Cooke was meanwhile ordered to clear the village, but his troops found great difficulty in penetrating the thick jungle. "Forms flitted from tree to tree, paused an instant to fire a shot or hurl a hand grenade, then disappeared again." For several hours there was confused fighting, both sides suffering heavy casualties. However, Capt. Peterson's platoon got round to the south of the village and took up a position on the road leading to Mabein. But soon after he was hit on the side of the head by a sniper's bullet and had to be carried back to the dressing station. Major Scott's Column ultimately succeeded in entering Baw, and drove the Japanese out of a number of houses. Thereupon the Japanese retired to fox-holes and camouflaged ambushes near the Mabein road. Just then a message from the headquarters came that since the supply-dropping had been completed, there was no need to continue the fight. Under cover of fire from 3-inch mortars, Scott's Column gradually withdrew and re-joined headquarters of the brigade. A large number of Japanese letters, maps and a hand-grenade were captured in this skirmish. Brigadier Wingate was interested in the canister type grenade and took it back with him to India.



## CHAPTER VIII

# Withdrawal of the Chindits

### THE DECISION TO WITHDRAW

News of Calvert's increasing difficulties combined with lack of news from Capt. Herring in the Kachin Hills forced Brigadier Wingate to take a decision to withdraw his forces to India.

It has already been indicated that Fergusson's Column rejoined the brigade at the Hehtin Chaung and Major Jeffries with HQ 142 Company arrived from No. 1 Group at the same time.

On 26 March, Brigadier Wingate held a conference of all the commanders on the Hehtin Chaung, outlining the reasons for withdrawal and the IV Corps instructions. The troops were greatly tired, they had gained invaluable experience and had demonstrated the usefulness of a Long Range Penetration force. All the objects for which the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was formed had been achieved, and in view of the strong Japanese concentrations in the Irrawaddy-Shweli triangle, and the difficulties in maintaining air supplies, the decision to withdraw was a sound one.

Owing to the large distances involved in their journey back to India, and the certainty of meeting considerable Japanese opposition while recrossing the Irrawaddy, Brigadier Wingate was of the opinion that it would be impossible to carry out the withdrawal with a full complement of animals and equipment. He considered a forced march to Inywa at the confluence of the Irrawaddy and Shweli rivers to afford the best chance of quick and safe return, because it would be the last place which the Japanese would expect the brigade to go to after their experience of its technique. Moreover, the brigade had also the best chance of obtaining boats at Inywa.

To prevent the withdrawal being regarded in the light of a defeat, Brigadier Wingate ordered his officers to give out that the brigade was marching north to co-operate with parachute troops in an attack on Bhamo and Indaw. "In view of the serious effect on morale which an acknowledged withdrawal is apt to produce in the early stages", Wingate considered this both justifiable and necessary.

Major Fergusson remonstrated against the abandonment of the bulk of the animals on the east side of the Irrawaddy. Brigadier Wingate, however, felt that this was necessary, and it was also essential to abandon six tons of equipment, to save lives that were much more precious. The Japanese had by this time drawn a tight net round the Chindits.



*March to Inywa*

The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade set out for Inywa on 27 March at 0100 hours. HQ Burma Rifles were the tail column and the difficult task of obliterating the trail of the columns had been assigned to them. The march through difficult jungle was slow, with frequent halts. At 1300 hours on 27 March, the Brigade had a short halt at a spot at the junction of the Hintha Chaung and one of its tributaries. An hour later a Japanese patrol attacked the tail of the column "owing to the carelessness of a Burma Rifleman."<sup>1</sup> Thereupon the brigade at once resumed its march northward while Fergusson's Column was detailed to lay an ambush and deal with any attempt by the Japanese to follow up.

After the first exchange of shots, the Japanese patrol had evidently moved off to report about the location of these columns. Fergusson then decided to leave the main body and march independently north-east to the Shweli after making his tracks as conspicuous as possible. In the jungle near Hintha the column laid a dummy bivouac, lighting huge fires and abandoning various articles of equipment with booby-traps attached, which the Japanese later attacked.

At 0300 hours on 28 March, Fergusson led two platoons towards the village of Hintha, hoping that a skirmish in the village would draw the Japanese away from the main force led by Wingate.

On the edge of the village, Fergusson saw four Japanese sitting round a fire and inquired from them the name of the village. As Fergusson afterwards related, "They gazed fascinated at me as I struggled with the pin of the grenade which I had been carrying in my right hand for the last twenty-four hours. They still sat on while there followed a neat lob (though I say it myself) into the middle of the fire, and a most entrancing bang. Then they all fell over outward on to their backs with perfect symmetry".<sup>2</sup>

The fight which followed lasted about two hours. The Japanese had well-prepared defensive positions which were effectively manned. Fergusson's Column suffered eleven casualties, including one of his senior officers, Capt. Macdonald. He himself was wounded by a bomb splinter, but set a high example of personal courage and determination. The Japanese casualties amounted to about thirty. Finding it impossible to force a passage through the village, Fergusson decided to break up his column into dispersal groups and to rejoin the main column.

Fergusson's attempts to pick up Wingate's trail failed, and his column was unfortunate to lose its wireless set on the march. He

<sup>1</sup> Wingate's Report, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> From "One More River to Cross" by Bernard Fergusson, in *Blackwood's Magazine*, September 1943.



therefore abandoned the chase and led his men across the Shweli from Pyinlebin.

In the meantime, Brigadier Wingate's force heard the sound of fighting at Hintha, while marching north in the direction of Inywa. It soon reached a place about four miles from Inywa by 1600 hours on 28 March. The troops were completely tired and lay down for a short rest before moving down to the Irrawaddy.

During this march, 2nd Burma Rifles lost touch with the rear column. While engaged in covering up the tracks, they were attacked by a Japanese party and were unduly delayed. The Commander therefore made for the operational rendezvous (not the crossing place) at Pyinlebin by a route further to the east. However, there was no trace of the rear column at that place, nor did they go to Inywa which the main force under Brigadier Wingate reached at 0300 hours on 29 March. This was a sad blow for the brigade, for it mainly depended upon the Burma Rifles for rowers and contacts with the Burmese. Wingate and No. 7 Column Commander began to collect boats, and finally succeeded in collecting about twenty country boats of various dimensions, with sufficient paddlers for only half of them.

Meanwhile, No. 2 Column and Scott's Column also arrived at Inywa. The troops had marched a distance of 50 miles within 48 hours with little or no sleep, and had thus gained the factor of surprise and an opportunity to cross unopposed. But the only difficulty was that they did not possess sufficient rowers and oars.

### *The Crossing at Inywa Opposed*

However, a part of the force embarked and much depended upon whether the force could establish a bridgehead on the other bank in sufficient strength. As the first troops had begun to land from the boats, firing started from a distance to cut them off. A group of Japanese appeared running down to the landing place and, since the undergrowth was thick, no idea could be gained of the strength of this force. The Japanese opened up with accurate mortar and automatic fire sinking one boat, but their sniper's rifle was the most effective weapon and did the most damage.

At the first sound of firing, Burmese oarsmen fled for safety. Nothing could induce them, either then or in the next few days, to return. The force was left with only a few country boats and hardly a dozen oarsmen. This meant that the Brigade Group consisting of about 1,000 persons would require  $2\frac{1}{2}$  days to get across, during which period Japanese fire from either bank would interfere, perhaps disastrously.

The small force of Major Gilke's Column that had landed on the west bank of the river counter-attacked the Japanese and appeared



to succeed in pushing them back to the north. But the Japanese force withdrew behind a hill shelter where it remained watching the situation for several hours, ready for action in case the remainder of the force again attempted a crossing.

Wingate felt that the Japanese would soon bring up reinforcements, and would try their best to foil the attempt to cross and would pin down his force. Moreover, his men were thoroughly weary and exhausted, and it was too much to expect them to fight vigorously in such a condition. He, therefore, abandoned the crossing.

Wingate was then faced with several alternatives. One was to allow the remainder of Gilkes' Column to join the small force on the west bank, while other columns withdrew to seek other routes. This plan was rejected because he was doubtful of the ability of the men to get across. The Japanese had detachments scattered in all the villages on the Irrawaddy and Wingate felt that crossing was impossible in the face of opposition.

Another plan then considered was to withdraw the whole force and attempt a crossing at some other suitable place. This was also not found practicable as the chances were extremely small for the whole force to get across without opposition by the Japanese. Hence he finally decided that the columns should part company with one another, move back into the jungle to give the Japanese a slip, and then break up into small dispersal groups, fan out in as extended a line as possible and finally make their own way out of Burma by the safest possible routes. An essential preliminary to following this course of action was that each dispersal group should be able to obtain food supply-droppings and be fully equipped with maps, compasses, and last but not least, wireless transmission sets. One such set was given to each column, and one to the Brigade HQ. The troops were more or less familiar with the dispersal method and its implications, which they had practised during training in India.

A "short and sad meeting"<sup>3</sup> of all the commanders took place. The group which had crossed the river was ordered to make for India on its own. It was then decided to march back to a safe rendezvous. Wingate with the Brigade HQ was the first to do so, and the columns followed suit. On his way back through Pyinlebin, Wingate failed to contact either Fergusson's Column or the Burma Rifles.

A suitable bivouac was found for Brigade HQ about a mile and a half from Pyinlebin, where Wingate was visited in the afternoon of 29 March by Captain Fraser, second-in-command of No. 5 Column, who gave him details of the column's brush with the Japanese at Hintha, and Captain Macpherson of HQ 2 Burma Rifles.

<sup>3</sup> Wingate's *Report*, p. 34.



Wingate told Fraser and Macpherson about his plan to have a supply-drop at 1400 hours on 30 March in an unreconnoitered jungle, ten miles east-south-east from Pyinlebin, and that he had included rations for HQ 2 Burma Rifles and would now also include No. 5 Column.

Macpherson said that Colonel Wheeler had made up his mind to attempt to re-cross the Irrawaddy during the same night and asked if Wingate approved of it. In view of "their many talents, good spirit and knowledge of the country", Wingate was of the opinion that the column had a good chance of getting across the river without splitting into groups. If their attempt failed, they were asked to come to the supply-dropping place.

On the morning of 30 March, Brigade HQ moved from Pyinlebin to the area of supply-dropping. Exactly at the appointed time the planes came over, and dropped plenty of rations, clothes, shoes, extra maps and compasses. Without these rations, it would have been difficult for the Brigade Group HQ consisting of 220 all ranks to reach India.

After the successful supply-dropping, for a whole week the group relaxed in the area and stuffed themselves with mule- and horse-flesh. Later, Wingate described it as the most pleasant week of the whole expedition. Thereafter, headquarters group was divided into five roughly equal dispersal groups, complete with quarter-inch maps. Each party had three officers and a Commanding Officer appointed by the Brigadier. Before they separated, Wingate spoke to his men telling them what they had been able to accomplish and why it was advisable for them to separate.

Wingate's own dispersal group numbered 43, officers and other ranks, of whom 34 eventually reached India. Included in his group, were Majors Anderson and Jeffries, and Capt. Moti Lal Katju, the Public Relations Officer.

#### RETURN OF THE COLUMNS TO INDIA

##### *No. 3 Column*

It has already been mentioned that Major Calvert was able to contact Brigade HQ without difficulty on 25 March. Wingate ordered him to kill all animals, ditch unessential equipment and return to India. Calvert's plan was to cross the Shweli river, in order to avoid getting caught up in the "backwash of the expedition", and move on to Bhamo to the north-east.

He reached the Shweli on 27 March only to find Japanese pickets in every village. His column attempted a crossing during the night, but at the start of the crossing the Japanese intercepted them. They had to pull back into the jungle leaving two men marooned on the



east bank. A small section of the column under Sergeant-Major Blain remained behind to tackle the Japanese advance-guard. The Japanese attacked this section in some strength, but were kept at bay by a murderous piece of work with a tommy-gun.<sup>4</sup>

Calvert's Column moved on to a safe bivouac some miles away and sent out scouts to gather information about the Japanese dispositions the next day. He learnt that in Mabein, Taunggon and the larger villages, Japanese had a garrison of one battalion, and that there was a force of seven hundred Japanese in Myitson. The latter part of the information was duly passed on to the R.A.F. base in Assam, and later reports showed that soon afterwards the planes appeared and the Japanese at Myitson were bombed and suffered heavy casualties.

Wingate's instructions to Calvert were to save as much personnel as possible. A message from Wingate said, "We can get new equipment and wireless sets. But it will take twenty-five years to get another man. These men have done their job, their experience is at a premium".<sup>5</sup> Calvert, therefore, decided not to sacrifice his men unnecessarily and gave up the idea of crossing the Shweli.

He arranged a good supply-drop on the night of 29/30 March, after which the column was divided into small dispersal groups. When the column split up, each party took up its quota of mules. Before Calvert's and Thompson's parties reached the Irrawaddy at a point south of Tagaung after making a detour, most of the mules had to be shot. At this juncture Calvert's party met another, commanded by Captain Griffith of the Burma Rifles, who had established good relations with the villagers and secured plenty of boats and supplies. Since there was much traffic on the river, the two parties safely crossed the river in daylight on 3 April. A Japanese force was within two miles of them, but failed to spot them.

The next barrier they had to encounter was the railway. Because of exhaustion and scarcity of water, several men had to be left behind. These were the first jungle casualties and more were to come during the next few days.

In April, Calvert reached a place on the railway south of the area of his previous operations. A friendly Burmese told him of the presence of Japanese in the nearby railway station. He decided to blow the railway, and the demolition party laid explosives in about a dozen places along the line and under the bridges. The subsequent explosions brought Japanese patrols racing down to the line, and Calvert's men were forced to hide in the jungle.

They slipped across the line unnoticed. Calvert parted company

<sup>4</sup> It was done by Blain who later received the Distinguished Conduct Medal for bravery.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 113.



from Thompson for security reasons on the eve of crossing. The latter took his group across the Mu valley, and after joining with Capt. Griffith's party reached the foot of the hill which rose two thousand feet above the valley. After continuous marching with some short rests, the party reached a place three miles from the Chindwin on 15 April. The approach to the river was not intercepted by Japanese patrols, but the troops suffered much from hunger, thirst, sickness and exhaustion. A Sikh sentry met them and took them to his officer who arranged for boats for them for crossing the river. Next day, after getting across into friendly territory they marched eleven miles to the roadhead. On the way they met two American Colonels, who said warmly, "Every one is proud of you. You've given the Japs something to remember."\* At the roadhead, Major-General Savory, Commander 23rd Indian Division, congratulated them on their achievements. They were driven in jeeps up to Tamu on the Indo-Burma frontier from where they reached Imphal, and were there lodged in a hospital and put on a special diet. This was on 21 April. But there was still no news of Wingate.

Meanwhile Calvert's party, marching cautiously from the railway line, had also managed to reach the Chindwin by 14 April. Here they were met by friendly villagers who gave them good food. In the afternoon of the same day, they crossed the river in excellent spirits and without any mishap, and within the next few days the remainder of Calvert's dispersal units turned up. Thus No. 3 Column was the first to get out of Burma. This was mainly due to Calvert's acumen and training. While personnel of his column were being carefully looked after in the Imphal hospital, Calvert made a dash to base headquarters and helped in making arrangements for helping other columns out.

### *No. 5 Column*

While Wingate and the rest of the columns were marching to Inywa, Fergusson led his men from Pyinlebin to the Shweli (30 March—1 April). The total strength of the column was a hundred and twenty including nine officers.<sup>7</sup> Fergusson's plan was to cross the Shweli and then strike out an independent route across the Irrawaddy to the Chindwin. He was anxious to avoid fighting if possible in order to save as many experienced men as possible.

The crossing was attempted at a village on the Shweli during the night of 31 March but, at first, treachery by boatmen was suspected, for instead of being ferried right across the river, they were landed on an island in mid-stream, separated from the east bank by

\* *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> *Beyond the Chindwin*, p. 136.



a hundred yards of swift-flowing channel of water, which was about four feet deep, and the bottom muddy. It was arranged that the taller men would wade through water while the shorter would go across in boats. Only two boats were available, one of which capsized while the other was carried away by the nervous boatman. Thus by 0400 hours there were no boats at all! Some men succeeded in wading across but others remained on the sand-bank. Fergusson, who had come across with the first party, decided to push on with whatever men he had with him. His column was now sadly depleted. It consisted of nine officers and sixty-five men; forty-six men had either been drowned or left behind on the sand-bank. The commander had to take a cruel decision, and he himself later admitted that "the crossing of the Shweli river will haunt me all my life."<sup>8</sup>

The column then marched due east. The men had no food and began to feel desperate, but Fergusson was hopeful of reaching the Kodaung Hill Tracts inhabited by Kachins, traditionally friendly to the British, in two or three days where he hoped to get plenty of food and rest. During their march they continually received news of Japanese patrols east of the Shweli.

On the morning of 3 April, Fergusson's men reached a tiny Kachin village called Zibyugin and were able to collect some rice and pork sufficient for two square meals. A small patrol under Lieut D.C. Menzies which went to the village later in the afternoon fell into Japanese hands. The next day a party of Burma Rifles led by Lt-Col Wheeler reached the village, drove out the Japanese, and saw Menzies dying. At this juncture Lt-Col Wheeler<sup>9</sup> was killed by a stray bullet, and his death was widely mourned, among others by the Kachin villagers with whom he was extremely popular.

From Zibyugin, Fergusson's men marched to the village of Kantha where they hoped to find some food. But the village was deserted. Here, their miseries ended, and their luck turned. As Fergusson has put it: "The fiasco at Kantha was a turning point in our fortunes."<sup>10</sup>

By 7 April, a village named Seiktha at a distance of only four miles from the Irrawaddy was reached. Here the tired troops got food and a guide for their subsequent march.

On 9 April, the column reached Kontha on the east bank of the Irrawaddy north of Katha, where it was decided to cross over. Before the crossing, the column was divided into three parties for security reasons. The entire column got across without any untoward incident.

<sup>8</sup> *Beyond the Chindwin*, p. 141.

<sup>9</sup> He received the rare distinction of a posthumous Distinguished Service Order. *Ibid* p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* p. 156.



After crossing the Irrawaddy, Fergusson's party moved in a northerly direction, and crossed the railway near Kadu. From Kadu their march lay through friendly Kachin territory. The village of Pakaw was reached on 17 April. This was "by far the largest village" in the Hills and very prosperous. From Pakaw, the party marched to the Meza river which was crossed easily. Here the men took their leave of the Kachins with "real sorrow", since they had shielded them from danger and given them the much-needed food and mental relief.

After marching rapidly from the Meza river, the parties of Fergusson and Flight-Lieut. Sharp reached the Chindwin and crossed over on 24 April. Fergusson and Fraser reached Imphal on 26 April where they got the news that Scott's Column was just north of the Irrawaddy, some twenty-five miles east of where No. 5 Column had crossed. An account of the successful route followed by Fergusson was flown out to Major Scott, who made use of it as far as the village of Saga.

\* Out of the thirty men in Fergusson's party, one died of cerebral malaria at Imphal, a week after the crossing of the Chindwin. Almost all the Burma Rifles personnel attached to this column had been taken prisoner.

### *Wingate's Escape*

Wingate's group rested for a whole week after the column was divided into dispersal parties. "For six days they ate mule for breakfast, mule for lunch, mule for dinner. On the seventh day they ate the horses."<sup>11</sup>

On 7 April, Wingate decided to make a second attempt to cross the Irrawaddy. The march to the river was extremely rapid and the party arrived at a point between Tigyaing and Tagaung, twenty-five miles south of Inyaw. For two consecutive nights, the party failed to get boats which would take them across. On 9 April, the crossing was successfully made and another two days' march brought them to the railway. In spite of it being regularly patrolled by the Japanese, Wingate's men crossed the barrier safely, as there was thick jungle within ten yards of the railway on either side.

The party marched for several days to reach the Chindwin on 26 April in a semi-starved condition. They suffered from diarrhoea, dysentery and jungle sores and one lance-corporal had to be left behind in the jungle. Wingate and four others swam the river, contacted British patrols and made efforts to arrange for boats to get the rest of the party across.

The rest of the party, left behind on the east bank, included

<sup>11</sup> *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 130.



Major Anderson and Captain Motilal Katju who were to cross the river by boats. During the night they had to avoid the Japanese patrols. Next morning (27 April), Captain Motilal Katju went into a Burmese village to look for boats. For several days past he had a premonition that he was not going to return alive, and had asked Jeffries to keep his diary, which contained a day-to-day account of Wingate's expedition. The latter, to cheer him up, refused to take the diary. Captain Katju never returned from his last patrol.<sup>12</sup> In the course of the day another party of swimmers crossed over and contacted Wingate. Finally, some boats were arranged for the men still left on the east bank.

While the party was crossing over in boats on 29 April, the Japanese opened up mortar fire, but luckily all the boats got through. The light was too bad, and the range too long for the Japanese to do accurate shooting. All the men were promptly pushed into the hospital at Imphal. Apart from Wingate's group, only one other headquarters' group succeeded in returning to India.

*Nos. 7 and 8 Columns and No. 1 Group.*

It will be recalled that towards the end of March 1943, an attempt had been made to cross the Irrawaddy at Inywa. In this, only a few men of Major Gilkes' Column (No. 7) had succeeded in reaching the west bank when the attempt was given up on account of Japanese opposition. The bulk of Major Gilkes' Column, still on the east bank, then parted company from Wingate and decided to march into China. This party, about 150 strong, eventually reached Kunming early in June when it was received by the Chinese Commander with great honour and kindness, and flown back to India by the United States Air Force.

A portion of No. 7 Column which had been left behind at Inywa was joined by 110 men of No. 5 Column who had been separated from their column after the encounter at Hinthia. A major portion of the combined party seems to have been lost on its way back to India, but one group reached Fort Hertz, 220 miles north of Myitkyina, in good condition. After their failure to cross the Irrawaddy at Inywa, Major Scott and Lieut-Col Cooke of No. 2 Group HQ decided to retreat to India by a route similar to that followed by Fergusson, namely, to cross the Shweli, then swing north-west to the Irrawaddy, on to the hill districts.

The columns reached the Shweli without incident, had a successful supply-drop containing new dinghies, life-belts and two days' rations, and built some rafts in which the Shweli was successfully crossed. On 4 April, the R.A.F. again dropped them supplies,

<sup>12</sup> Captain Katju was on the editorial staff of an Indian newspaper in peace time, and, before joining Wingate, had been decorated for gallantry in Libya.



which included ten days' rations. The columns then marched straight to the Irrawaddy in good spirits with only brief halts, and reached a point on the river only twenty miles distant from Bhamo, one of the main Japanese bases. They managed to snatch two large boats and a junk from the Burmese, and the party consisting of over two hundred troops made their way without difficulty across the Irrawaddy. They then sent a message to Air Base for a last supply-drop and then buried the wireless transmission set after smashing it.

The Column commander was worried about sick men in the party. They had run short of food on their way to the supply-dropping zone. "With nothing to eat but bamboo shoots and jungle palms, they began to drop like flies from hunger and disease." The only hope for the sick was rescue from the air and Scott fully realised it. Next day they put out their smoke signals for the R.A.F., and strips of parachutes were laid out reading: Plane land here.

On 11 April, supplies were dropped by a plane, which however could not land. Next day another plane came with a message to the Chindits:—"Mark out 1200 yards landing ground to hold 12-ton transport." The Chindits marked a clearing about 800 yards long.

Early next morning a DC3 arrived with a fighter escort and although the strip was not long enough it landed on the field. All the sick and wounded were taken aboard. Twelve minutes after landing the plane took off with "seventeen walking hospital cases". Of the many stories told of the Wingate expedition, none is more spectacular than this rescue flight of the R.A.F. transport aircraft to bring out the sick and wounded men who, otherwise, might never have lived to return to India.

The rest of the column marched in the direction of Fort Hertz, and had a skirmish with Japanese troops at Kawkareik Chaung after which the column was divided into three dispersal groups. All these groups followed different routes and reached and crossed the Chindwin safely at different dates in the month of May, except No. 1 Group which was broken up by Japanese attack and had to cross that river in scattered, unorganised parties. Patrols of the Indian and British forces were vigilant on the west bank of the river Chindwin and parties of the Chindits had no difficulty once they contacted these patrols. Some of the returning men were flown back to India from Fort Hertz and others were sent to Imphal.

News of the expedition remained a closely guarded secret throughout this period (1 April—1 June). Groups of ten to twenty trickled into Imphal daily and every morning Wingate and his officers checked the list of arrivals and casualties carefully. Although doing dangerous jobs, nearly all column commanders returned back safely. Of the three Lieut-Cols., Wheeler, as has already been



mentioned, was killed by a stray bullet, and another was reported missing.

By the first week in June, over 2000 of the total of 3000 men who had taken part in the expedition had re-entered India and mostly marched back with their arms and equipment. The bulk of the casualties occurred on the homeward march, after the Chindits were cut off from the rest of the world. Of the thousand missing, about four hundred and fifty had been killed in encounters with the Japanese. A further hundred and twenty of the 2 Burma Rifles obtained permission to remain in their home areas to protect their families, with means of contacting the Brigade. The bulk of the remaining four hundred and thirty fell into Japanese hands.

### *Reception and Care on Reaching India*

Wingate has recorded that "the troops had endured severities to which there are few parallels in our campaigns."<sup>13</sup> All officers and men had marched not less than 750 miles and most of them did 1,000 miles. The hardships of the expedition had played havoc with the physique of the bulk of men; many had been reduced to mere skin and bone; their stomachs caved inward and ribs could be seen prominently above cavities. A large number suffered from beri-beri caused by mal-nutrition and contracted malaria again after re-crossing the Chindwin.

But all the troops had borne appalling hardships with good cheer and resolution and had marched out bravely with little or no rest under their officers with arms and personal equipment intact. Surprisingly enough, the Chindits showed better discipline towards the end than at the beginning of the campaign.

The rehabilitation of these invaluable men was, therefore, of prime importance. All those who re-entered India through the IV Corps front were immediately sent to No. 19 Casualty Clearing Station at Imphal where they received excellent diet and most efficient and kindly care from the doctors and nursing staff. This soon helped to offset the effect of the strain and privations to which they had been subjected.

A small percentage of the troops was unfit for rigorous marching for a long time but the remainder constituted a core of experienced personnel qualified, more than others, for command, training and employment in further operations of a similar nature.

### *Nature of Achievement*

What did the expedition achieve? Wingate claimed that it was a "complete success". At a press interview in New Delhi, a

<sup>13</sup> Wingate's Report, p. 37.



correspondent asked him if his expedition had gone according to plan. Wingate answered: "In war nothing ever goes according to plan—not in this kind of war. A campaign may be planned meticulously, yet there will be change as fighting progresses. . . . The expedition was a complete success."<sup>14</sup>

From a strictly operational point of view, the results of the expedition were by no means spectacular. The Chindits undoubtedly put the Mandalay—Myitkyina railway out of action for a period of four weeks, forcing the Japanese to use the longer and more limited river and road L of C *via* Bhamo. They also gathered much valuable information both as regards the topography of the country and conditions of life in occupied Burma. Moreover, they killed a large number of Japanese troops, and a larger number by directing R.A.F. bombers to attack Japanese troop concentrations. A large Japanese force estimated at six to eight battalions was tied up in North Burma by the expedition. It also prevented Japanese infiltration across the Chindwin and indirectly helped the Chinese operating from Yunnan and loosened the Japanese grip on the Kachin Levies north of Myitkyina.

But the strategical value of the campaign was nil. It was originally meant to be the spearhead of an Allied offensive but due to a variety of reasons, the expected offensive failed to materialise. The Wingate expedition has been compared to "an engine without a train."<sup>15</sup> It successfully carried out all the preparatory work for an offensive operation, but there was no attempt to follow-up by the main forces.

The great value of the campaign lies in the fact that it demonstrated the power of columns to penetrate as far as they liked into Japanese occupied Burma. The Japanese counter-measures failed to check this infiltration behind their lines of communication, and they nowhere succeeded in trapping a sizable part of the brigade, since it was spread over a wide area of the country. The campaign further showed to the world that Japanese supremacy in jungle-warfare could be successfully contested and that they were no longer masters of the jungle.

Critics have made out that the Wingate expedition achieved little at high cost. The Japanese considered that Wingate's exploits in Burma had only some nuisance value, but achieved nothing from a military point of view. Perhaps the best-plea that may be put forward for Wingate is that his experiment in 1943 made possible his achievements in 1944. "It was the birth of an idea which had greater effect later on."<sup>16</sup> In the light of experience gained during

<sup>14</sup> *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 148.

<sup>15</sup> Burchett, W. G.: *Wingate's Phantom Army*, p. 229.

<sup>16</sup> Roy McKelvie: *The War in Burma*, p. 83.



the expedition, every brigade except one was flown to Burma in 1944 with the best possible backing.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Wingate received a second bar to his Distinguished Service Order for leading the Brigade into Burma. "He displayed" said the terse official report "skill, personal courage and endurance of a high order. He again proved himself an intrepid leader." Soon after the campaign, he was awarded the Lawrence of Arabia Memorial Medal by the Royal Central Asian Society for his achievements in Burma during the campaign.



## CHAPTER IX

# Clearing the Decks for Offensive Action

Brigadier Wingate's adventure was conceived as part of a general offensive against the Japanese in Central Burma, but lack of adequate resources prevented the launching of an all-out attack in the upper regions. However, in the coastal belt of Arakan an abortive offensive was mounted against Akyab, which continued from December 1942 to May 1943. The 14th Indian Division succeeded in capturing Buthidaung and Maungdaw, but further progress was held up and the Japanese counter-offensive forced the Indian troops to retreat.<sup>1</sup> Then came the monsoon, and the two sides, the Japanese and the Allies, settled down to minor patrol activity on both the fronts, awaiting the return of the dry season to recommence active major operations.

In November 1943 when the monsoon was over, the position of the Allies had improved in the various theatres of the global war and they had taken the offensive both in the west and in the east. The Russian steam-roller was grinding slowly forward towards Germany. Anglo-American armies were fighting in Italy against stubborn German resistance, using amphibious assaults to assist their slow advance. A great build-up of forces was proceeding in Great Britain for the cross-channel invasion of France. However, the situation was not yet free from anxiety. Though the German Leviathan was being squeezed from every side, it was still a powerful and fierce enemy. In the east, the Japanese had shot their bolt, and were simply trying to wear out the Allies by the desperate defence of their newly won possessions. The tremendous Pacific battles had, however, decimated Japanese air and naval forces, so that even in Burma the Allies had regained air superiority.<sup>2</sup> General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz were approaching the Philippines, aiming to proceed thence to the Ryukyu Islands and the invasion of Japan itself, if necessary. In the overall strategy of the Allies, the forces fighting in Europe enjoyed the first priority for equipment, and the forces thrusting towards the Japanese home-lands the next. In Burma, the Japanese were quite content to have the *status quo*, except that they wanted to prevent the reopening of land-communications between India and China by the Ledo Road, and,

<sup>1</sup> See *Arakan Operations, 1942-45* (CIS Historical Section).

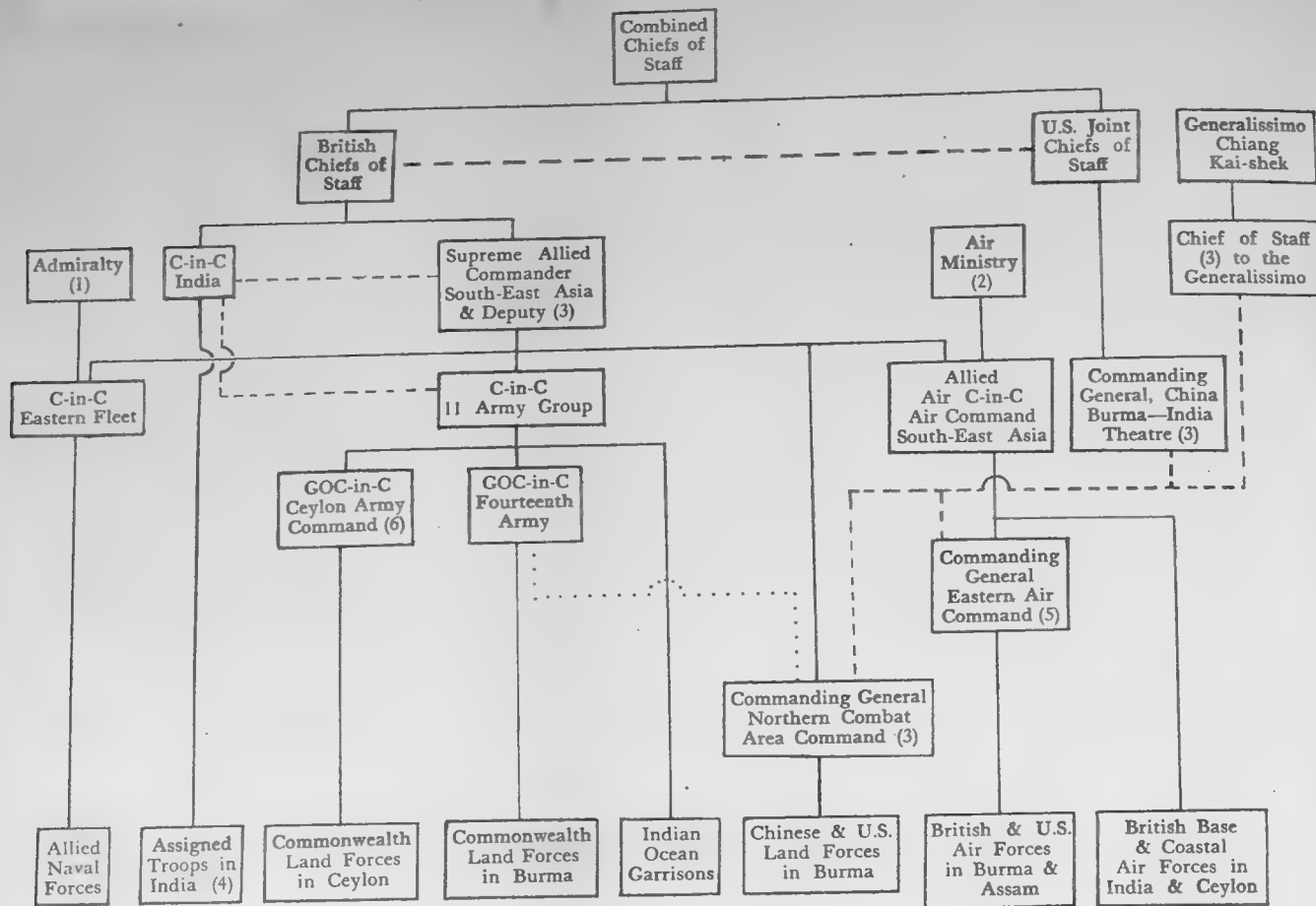
<sup>2</sup> Wavell: *Despatch on operations in India Command*, 1 January to 20 June 1943, p. 3.



# CHAIN OF COMMAND

After Integration of the Allied Air Forces—14th December 1943

KEY	
Direct Command ..	—————
Liaison ..	- - - - -
Temporary Operational Control ..	.....



- (1) The C-in-C Eastern Fleet (and, from 22nd November, 1944, the C-in-C, East Indies Fleet) was directly responsible to the Admiralty in all matters connected with the security of sea communications in the Indian Ocean both inside and outside the area of South-East Asia Command, and with offensive action against the enemy's naval forces. (See 'A', paragraph 29).
- (2) The Allied Air C-in-C was directly responsible to the Air Ministry for the control of Coastal Air Forces which were operated in accordance with the requirements of the C-in-C Eastern Fleet. (See 'A', paragraph 34).
- (3) Until 21st October 1944 the posts of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia; Commanding General, China-Burma-India theatre; Commanding General, Northern Combat Area Command; and Chief of Staff to the Generalissimo; were all held by Lieut.-General Stilwell. Until 20th June, 1944, in his capacity as Commanding General, Northern Combat Area Command, he was under the operational control of the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Fourteenth Army. From that date until 21st October 1944 he came under the direct command of the Supreme Allied Commander.
- (4) Refers to those troops which were assigned to SEAC but were still located within India Command.
- (5) The Commanding General, Eastern Air Command, besides being the Allied Air Commander for the Burma campaign was also responsible for the air protection of Hump operations. In all other respects these operations were controlled jointly by the Commanding General, China-Burma-India theatre and the United States Air Transport Command. (See 'B', paragraphs 19 and 20).
- (6) G.O.C.-in-C Ceylon Army Command was under the Supreme Allied Commander through C-in-C Ceylon (who was also under S.A.C.) for defence of Ceylon.

—From "Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, by the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia."  
(His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1951).



if possible, to stop the air ferry service from Assam to China. The Allied forces in India were superior to the Japanese in Burma in the air, on the sea and on land. Their task was to reopen land-communication to China either by invading the whole of Burma, or merely through the Ledo Road. Plans were afoot for both, and resources were at last in sight. The stage was set for the reconquest of Burma. But detailed arrangements had still to be completed before the advance could begin.

#### COMMAND

An important problem was that of reorganising the command in the eastern theatre. The existing arrangement lacked unity of control and was productive of friction. The Indian and British ground and air forces fighting the Japanese in Burma were under the control of the Commander-in-Chief, India, while the naval forces operating in the Indian Ocean were under the command of the British East Indies Fleet and were based on Kilindini in East Africa.<sup>3</sup> The American forces in the theatre were commanded by Lieut-General J. W. Stilwell, the military adviser to Marshal Chiang Kai-shek. This position was deemed to be unsatisfactory for successful operations and in the Washington Conference of May 1943, known by its code-name of "Trident", President Roosevelt and Mr. Winston Churchill agreed in principle to the creation of an inter-Allied inter-Service Command to conduct operations against Japan in South-East Asia. Moreover, their view would appear to be that one man could not properly discharge the heavy duties of the Commander-in-Chief in India and at the same time direct extensive operations against the Japanese in Burma. Raising and equipping forces in India, maintaining internal security in the country and defending the North-West Frontier would occupy his whole time, and, therefore, it was considered necessary to relieve the Commander-in-Chief, India, from the responsibility of conducting the operations against the Japanese in the east. Extensive operations by the Allies were sure to run into needless difficulties unless the existing set-up of command in the theatre was radically improved.

In the first Quebec Conference of August 1943, therefore, Lord Louis Mountbatten was appointed Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, according to the principle agreed to at the "Trident" Conference. The new command took over from the India Command on 16 November 1943. The South-East Asia Command included Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Malaya, Sumatra and the northern

<sup>3</sup> Mountbatten: *"Strategy of the South-East Asia Campaign"*, a speech given to the Royal United Service Institution on 9 October 1946.



Indian Ocean. Moreover, the portion of India east of the Brahmaputra river was also included in the command by arrangement with the India Command. The rest of India remained a separate command under the Commander-in-Chief, India. However, since Admiral Mountbatten's forces were largely based on and maintained by the India Command, closest liaison was to be maintained between the two commands. The Chinese also were closely involved in the operations in Burma, hence liaison with Chiang Kai-shek was also important. This was secured mainly through personal contacts between the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, and by the appointment of Lieutenant-General Stilwell, who was Chief of Staff to the Generalissimo, as the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander.<sup>4</sup>

Lieut-General Stilwell's position was further complicated by the fact that he was also the Administrator of Lend-Lease Supplies to China and the Commander of the American land and air forces in China, Burma and India. In spite of the heavy burden of these four key posts, General Stilwell had also assumed the field command of the Chinese troops operating from India in the north of Burma, in what came to be known as the Northern Combat Area. As Lend-Lease Administrator, and commander of the China-Burma-India theatre, he was directly under the United States Government; as the Chief of Staff to the Generalissimo and Deputy Supreme Allied Commander, he owed dual allegiance to Chiang Kai-shek and to Lord Mountbatten. Finally, as Deputy Supreme Allied Commander, he was above General Giffard, Commander of the 11th Army Group, and General Slim, Commander of the Fourteenth Army, while, at the same time, as commander of the Northern Combat Area Command, he was subordinate to both.<sup>5</sup> It is necessary to appreciate this situation, for it led to some complications later on.

Under the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander were placed the three Service Chiefs. Admiral Sir James Somerville commanded the East Indies Fleet. The ground and air forces were under General Sir George Giffard and Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, respectively. The 11th Army Group under General Giffard included all the British and Indian armies in the South-East Asia Command, including the troops in Ceylon and other islands. Within

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Lieut-General Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart had been posted to Chungking as the Representative of the Prime Minister and the Supreme Allied Commander with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.

<sup>5</sup> Northern Combat Area Command came under the Fourteenth Army, which itself was under the 11th Army Group. But Stilwell insisted that he would never be under General Giffard, and would be under General Slim only till his troops reached Kamaing (near Myitkyina) after which he would be under Lord Mountbatten himself.



the 11th Army Group, the Fourteenth Army was the formation fighting the Japanese in Burma. This Army was made up of the XV Corps in Arakan, the XXXIII Corps in reserve for the amphibious operations then being planned, and the IV Corps on the Central (Imphal) Front. The air forces in the command were fully integrated on 14 December 1943, under Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, as Allied Air Commander-in-Chief. Major-General Stratemeyer was appointed his Deputy and given command of the Eastern Air Command which was formed to include all air forces fighting in the Burma theatre. The forces under the Eastern Air Command were divided into four components, viz. the Third Tactical Air Force, a Strategic Air Force, a Troop Carrier Command and a Photographic Reconnaissance Force.<sup>6</sup> The Third Tactical Air Force had, as one of its sub-divisions, the Northern Air Sector Force responsible for the air support of General Stilwell's forces in northern Burma and the air defence of the air ferry route over the "Hump". Other sub-divisions of the Third Tactical Air Force were the 224 Group responsible for air support to the Arakan front, and the 221 Group which was charged with the air support to the central front based on Imphal.

#### SUPPLIES

Next to the problem of the command set-up came the problem of supplies for the Burma campaign. There were two distinct aspects of the supply problem. One was that of overall priorities for obtaining supplies of equipment, munitions, landing craft etc. from the United States and the United Kingdom. As has been stated earlier, the Burma front was very low on the priority list, since the operations in Europe and in the Pacific were judged to be of greater importance. It was inevitable, therefore, that the South-East Asia Command should experience some shortage of important items before the war in Europe had ended. In actual fact, many operations planned by this command had to be given up, one after the other, because of shortage of assault craft, and at one stage, "order was received to send back 5.5" ammunition to the European theatre at a time when it appeared to be the only real answer to the Japanese fox-hole".<sup>7</sup>

The second aspect of the supply problem was the difficulty of conveying the supplies available from the base areas to the front

<sup>6</sup> The Commanding General, Eastern Air Command, besides being the Allied Air Commander for the Burma campaign was also responsible for the air protection of the "Hump" air ferry to China, *Report to the Combined Chief of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, 1943-45.*

<sup>7</sup> Mountbatten's speech given to the Royal United Service Institution on 9 October 1946.



lines. To overcome this difficulty, the capacity of the Assam Line of Communication was radically improved. The peace-time capacity of the Bengal-Assam Railway was only 600 tons per day. By November 1943, this figure had been raised to 3070 tons. In March 1944, sections of the line were placed under American railway engineers and the capacity rose to 4690 tons per day in June 1944, and 8630 tons per day in March 1945.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, pipelines were laid from the sea ports to the front lines for the movement of petrol. Six-inch pipelines connected Budge-Budge port, near Calcutta, to Tinsukia in north-eastern Assam, and Chittagong also to Tinsukia via Dimapur. A four-inch pipeline carried petrol from Chittagong to the armies at Imphal, and later on these "oil terminals" were pushed to Tamu and to Myitkyina and even up to Kunming from Tinsukia. These pipelines considerably eased the transport situation by releasing wagons for other goods. Together with the enormous expansion of the capacity of the railway itself, these measures succeeded in solving the problem of supplies.

#### MONSOON AND DISEASE

Burma was one of the few fronts of the global war where even "General Rain and General Mud" were against the Allies. For five months of the year, operations were brought to a stand-still by the monsoon deluge. Rain fell in sheets day after day. The men remained almost permanently soaked to the skin. Roads were frequently washed away, and even the railways were occasionally breached. Flying became appallingly difficult. The dreaded cumulonimbus thunder clouds filled the skies from ground level to 30,000 feet. It was almost unknown for a plane to enter one of these inky monsters and to come out again. Violent disturbances pulled planes down thousands of feet in a few seconds, and wrenched off their wings. It was often impossible to fly above or below the clouds and planes seldom carried enough petrol to fly round them. It was not surprising, therefore, that the monsoon months were widely regarded as "close season" for serious fighting. But after the formation of the South-East Asia Command, vigorous steps were taken to continue fighting even during the period of monsoon. Bull-dozers and other mechanical appliances were freely employed to prevent the cessation of the flow of supplies by road-slides. Even air activity was continued by flying extra-numerous sorties on the few days that were clear. Moreover, all scientific skill and forethought were utilised to minimise the discomforts of the troops. Medical facilities were greatly improved and herculean efforts were

<sup>8</sup> Mountbatten's *Report*, p. 13.



made to overcome the terrible menace of malaria. The malarial mosquitoes, the scrub typhus mite and the amoeba of dysentery were indeed a deadlier enemy than the Japanese guns, for in 1943, for every man admitted to hospital with wounds there were 120 who were laid up with disease. By 1944, the proportion was reduced to 1 in 20, and by 1945 there were only ten sick men for every battle casualty.<sup>9</sup> Due to these phenomenal improvements, it became not only possible but advantageous to fight vigorously in the thick of the monsoon and in the most unhealthy areas, for the Japanese were still greatly at the mercy of the elements and the germs. The Supreme Allied Commander "determined to enlist disease as an additional weapon on our side", by continuing to fight in the monsoon, to gain the advantage that would come to the side that fought on when the other expected both sides to stop.

#### MORALE

Another matter that required attention at the preliminary stage was the low state of morale of the forces. Ever since Pearl Harbour, the Allied troops in the eastern theatre had been suffering defeat after defeat at the hands of the Japanese. It would have been very surprising if the defeats had not depressed the troops. In the first half of 1943, the Allied air forces had obtained superiority over the Japanese, but the advance on Akyab had ended in a failure, which had an unduly shattering effect on the confidence of the troops. Many began to wonder if there was not some truth in the Japanese boast that they were invincible jungle-fighters. Soon after his arrival, therefore, the Supreme Allied Commander took care to visit the troops in the different sectors and talk to them. These "pep-talks" greatly increased the confidence of the troops in their new commander and morale rapidly improved.<sup>10</sup> Steps were also taken to improve the publicity of developments on the Burma front in the world's newspapers to counter the depressing legend of Burma being the "Forgotten Front". A daily newspaper called "SEAC" was started for the troops in the theatre itself. Moreover, successful patrol actions and minor skirmishes soon reassured the troops in their high opinion of themselves and their weapons. The result of these efforts was soon epitomised in the famous remark of a common soldier who wrote home, "My pack is on my back, my gun is oiled and loaded and as I walk in the shadow of death, I fear no son-of-a-bitch."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Mountbatten's speech to the Royal United Service Institution 9 October 1946.

<sup>10</sup> Mountbatten's speech, *op. cit.* Ray Murphy: *The Last Viceroy*, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> The words were of one of Merrill's Marauders, but the feeling was common to all the troops in the theatre; *Campaign in Burma* (His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1946) p. 84.



## THEATRE PLANNING

Offensive operations for their success demanded the laying out of broad strategy for the entire theatre. For the campaigning season of 1943-44 plans had been tentatively prepared at the General Headquarters in India. On the formation of the South-East Asia Command, the planning staff of the India Command was transferred *en bloc* to the new Command in order to ensure continuity of planning and to avoid delay. All Allied resources in the theatre were to be utilised for the impending offensive. Apart from the British and Indian troops, large numbers of Chinese troops were also present in India. Many had sought refuge in India after the Japanese conquest of Burma where they were operating in 1942 under Lieut-General Stilwell. And 13000 Chinese troops had been transported by air from China to India, from October 1942 to December 1942, in order to bring up the total of Chinese troops in India to two divisions.<sup>12</sup> These troops were under the direct command of Lieut-General Stilwell and had received intensive training under American instructors at Ramgarh in Bihar. Moreover, there was also available a brigade of American troops under Brigadier-General Merrill. Trained on the lines of the British Commandos, they were capable of operating deep into the jungle and proved very useful later on in General Stilwell's advance on Myitkyina.

In broad terms, the South-East Asia Command envisaged two divergent lines of advance which may be called the "overland strategy" and the "naval approach" respectively. The aim of both was to open a supply route to China, but their respective advocates were divided substantially in the mode of execution.<sup>13</sup> As desired by Mr. Churchill, the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, and most of his staff preferred the 'naval approach'. They proposed to capture the Andaman Islands, then Northern Sumatra, then the Bangkok area, and finally a port in China itself, "where one Liberty ship could bring in at least as many supplies as could be taken by road into China in a month". General Stilwell, on the other hand, supported by the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington, favoured an attack on North Burma and the reopening of old Burma Road, connected to Assam by the Ledo Road. He considered the 'naval approach' a detour, if not actually a red herring across the track. These two conflicting views were never really reconciled, but cropped up again and again, as would be seen later on.

<sup>12</sup> Fuller: *The Second World War, 1939-45*, p. 210.

<sup>13</sup> *Stilwell Papers*, edited by Theodore White (William Sloane Associates, Inc., New York 1948).

Admiral Leahy: *I Was There* (Victor Gollanz Ltd., London, 1950).

It should be noted, however, that Major General Wademyer, an American, supported Mountbatten's strategy.





Lieut.-General  
Sir Geoffrev Scoones  
Commander IV Corps



Lieut.-General  
Sir Montagu Stopford  
Commander XXXIII Corps



General Sir George Giffard  
Commander 11th Army Group



Lieut.-General  
(later Field-Marshal)  
Sir William Slim  
C.O.C.-in-C Fourteenth Army



The Supreme Allied Commander had been given two main tasks to perform.<sup>14</sup> Firstly, he was required to engage the Japanese forces as closely and as continuously as possible, in order to reduce their strength, particularly in the air, by attrition. Secondly, he was told to maintain and improve the supply lines to China. Capacity of their air ferry route was to be increased, and operations were to be undertaken for clearing North Burma of the Japanese, so that ground convoys might reach China from Assam by the Ledo and the Burma roads. This required an Allied advance in North Burma and the recapture of the area up to and including Bhamo.

For a long period, however, the South-East Asia Command failed to arrive at any definite plan of operations and one plan after another was being dropped for lack of resources, particularly landing craft. The first plan to fall through was worked out in October 1943. Named "Culverin", it envisaged an amphibious operation against Northern Sumatra. But the plan required more resources than were then available in the theatre, and when the Combined Chiefs of Staff decided that further resources would not be sent to Lord Mountbatten, the plan had to be dropped at the end of October 1943. Next, working on the basis of only the existing resources in the theatre, the planning staff suggested seven separate but related operations, as follows<sup>15</sup>:—

- (a) The capture of the Andaman Islands by amphibious assault by the XXXIII Corps, with naval and air support, as the first step towards an assault on Sumatra, or the Kra Isthmus (in Malaya Peninsula) to enable the Allied aircraft to attack Japanese shipping in the Malacca Straits and the Gulf of Siam.
- (b) On the Arakan front, an advance by the XV Corps, supported by the 224 Group, Royal Air Force, and by naval coastal forces, along the Mayu Peninsula for the eventual capture of Akyab Island with amphibious forces.
- (c) On the Central, or Imphal Front, an advance by the IV Corps, supported by the 221 Group, Royal Air Force, up to and across the Chindwin river. This operation, together with the thrust towards Akyab, was designed to draw up the Japanese reserves and thus facilitate the capture of North Burma.
- (d) In North Burma, an advance by Lieut-General Stilwell's Chinese army in India, supported by the Northern Air Sector Force, down the Hukawng Valley to the

<sup>14</sup> Directive dated 23 October 1943 from Prime Minister of United Kingdom to Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia Command; Mountbatten's *Report to Combined Chiefs of Staff*, appendix C.

<sup>15</sup> Mountbatten's *Report*, p. 27.



Myitkyina—Mogaung area. This operation was to clear the track for the Ledo Road, and then, in co-operation with the Chinese advance from Yunnan along the Burma Road and the operations of Major-General Wingate's Special Force, to capture North Burma.

- (e) An advance by the Chinese Expeditionary Force supported by the 14th United States Air Force from Paoshan in Yunnan to Bhamo and Lashio, to secure the China end of the Ledo Road.
- (f) Operations in support of (d) and (e) by the Special Force under Wingate, supported by No. 1 Air Commando and the 3rd Tactical Air Force.
- (g) The capture of Indaw airfield by the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade and the subsequent fly-in by Troop Carrier Command of the 26th Indian Division, which would hold the town till Lieut-General Stilwell's forces reached and relieved the division.

These plans were presented before the Allied war-leaders at the Cairo Conference in the last week of November 1943 and were approved. But in the Teheran Conference, following immediately after, Marshal Stalin pressed strongly for the early opening of the Second Front in Western Europe, and consequently, on 7 December 1943, more than half of the existing amphibious resources in South-East Asia Command were withdrawn to Europe by the Combined Chiefs of Staff. The remaining assault craft and other resources were so grossly insufficient for the capture of the Andaman Islands that the plan had to be dropped. But Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek had consented to move the Chinese Expeditionary Force from Yunnan on the condition that the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, would carry out an amphibious operation at the same time. Therefore, to fulfil the letter of the agreement with the Chinese leader, it was planned to stage an amphibious assault against Akyab. But the Generalissimo asserted that the agreement with him had been broken, and so the Chinese advance from Yunnan would not take place. On this, the airborne assault on Indaw airfield had to be cancelled, for it had neither any significance nor reasonable chance of success if the Yunnan Force did not advance. For a while, planning of "Pigstick", the amphibious assault on Akyab, went forward, but on 7 January 1944, that too was cancelled on the orders of the Chief of Staff.<sup>16</sup> The thirst of the European theatre for landing craft was insatiable, and since the Yunnan Force would not advance in any case, it was considered that all the remaining landing craft too should be sent to the Mediterranean.

<sup>16</sup> Mountbatten's *Report* p. 30.



As a result of these developments, only four out of the original seven plans were left for the South-East Asia Command to execute, viz. the thrust along the Mayu Peninsula, the limited advance from Imphal to the Chindwin, Lieut-General Stilwell's advance from Ledo towards Myitkyina, and the Special Force operations. It was feared that if the Japanese stayed and devoted their resources simply to wear down the attacking Allied troops, progress would be very slow and no radical improvement in the situation would occur in 1944. As it happened, the Japanese undertook an offensive gamble of their own, and when they lost it, Allied advance was facilitated. The Yunnan Force also advanced ultimately and helped to clear North Burma of the Japanese, but all this was still in the womb of time in the anxious days of December 1943.

A last attempt was made by the South-East Asia Command, early in 1944, to obtain sanction for the "naval approach", as against the "overland strategy". On 8 January 1944, the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, telegraphed to the Chiefs of Staff, giving his considered opinion in favour of an amphibious assault on Sumatra and thereby opening a port on the China coast to supply the Chinese armies. He argued that the Ledo Road would not be safe till the whole of Burma was cleared of the Japanese, and in that case the old Burma Road would become available again.<sup>17</sup> Fighting for or constructing the Ledo Road, therefore, would prove a waste of effort. On the other hand, the defeat of Germany, then expected to come about by the end of 1944, would release considerable amphibious craft which might then be used to implement the "naval approach" and to capture one of the Chinese sea-ports. To press these views before the Chiefs of Staff the "Axiom" Mission was sent to London and Washington on 5 February 1944. But Lieut-General Stilwell was vehemently opposed to this strategy and sent another mission to Washington without informing the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia. The Combined Chiefs of Staff, again, decided in favour of the "overland strategy", and the "Axiom" Mission had to report failure on its return.<sup>18</sup> After this there was no doubt left that the South-East Asia Command had to devote its major effort to the reconquest of Burma by land. Endless discussions and dark uncertainties were over at last. The Supreme Allied Commander was left with a clear objective before him, and a firm estimate of the resources assigned to him to attain it.

By the end of 1943, final arrangements were practically completed for the offensive against Burma. A new Command had been

<sup>17</sup> In this conclusion, Mountbatten was completely vindicated by the actual course of events in 1944-45.

<sup>18</sup> The Axiom Mission was headed by Major-General Wedemeyer of the U.S. Army, who was one of the very few American officers supporting the "naval approach".



established on a thoroughly integrated inter-Service, inter-Allied basis. The broad strategy for the new Command had been thrashed out, aiming at the invasion and conquest of North Burma and the reopening of an overland supply-line to China. The troops to carry out the offensive stood ready, trained and equipped. The problem of supplying them steadily with munitions and food was being solved by increasing the capacity of the Bengal—Assam Railway and by the newly developed technique of air supply. These innovations, initiated in most cases by the Supreme Allied Commander himself, together with his tremendous drive and magnetic personality, changed the complexion of the war in Burma. The morale of the troops improved steadily with the obvious preparations for a major offensive. A new excitement was in the air, and they felt instinctively that they were no longer the "Forgotten Army". Growing Allied resources and scientific skill were being used to combat malaria and the monsoon. Though they did not realise it, the forces were ready to fight the Japanese everywhere and all the year round. The curtain was about to lift on one of the most stirring acts of the impassioned drama of war.



## CHAPTER X

# Preliminary Operations: 15 November 1943 to 7 March 1944

### THE CENTRAL FRONT

When the South-East Asia Command was formed on 16 November 1943, the Central Front was defended by the IV Corps with its headquarters at Imphal. This Corps was commanded by Lieut-General Sir Geoffrey Scoones, K.B.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., M.C. He was responsible for an extensive front ranging from the Chin and Lushai Hills in the south to the Somra Tract and Naga Hills in the north. The Central Front was separated from the Arakan Front by the Lushai Hills, where large forces could not operate due to the extreme paucity of communications. In the north, similarly, the Saramati mountain interposed an impassable barrier between the Central Front and the Northern Combat Area Command of Lieut-General Stilwell.

As described earlier, the whole of this area was covered with dense jungle, with alternating hill ranges and river valleys running north and south. There were few roads. From Imphal, situated in the Manipur valley, the main line of communications ran north-west via Kohima to Dimapur on the Assam-Bengal Railway, a distance of 138 miles. To the south-east, a road joined Imphal via Palel to Tamu in the Kabaw valley. Bifurcating at Tamu, one branch of the road led east to Sittaung on the Chindwin, while another led south down the valley to Kalewa via Htinzin and Yazagyo. Parallel to the second branch but further west, a road ran from Imphal to Tiddim and thence to Kalemmyo via Kennedy Peak and Fort White. Of all these roads, only the Dimapur—Imphal and Imphal—Tamu were fit for regular vehicular traffic; the others were all indifferent tracks in the process of being improved and broadened. The Japanese troops were being maintained by similar roads leading east from Kalewa and south-east from Kalemmyo to Pakokku via Gangaw. The Chindwin and the Myittha rivers, moreover, provided the Japanese with arteries of communications, though the Allied air forces were continuously attacking their river-boats and barges.

### THE TROOPS

For operations over this extensive area the IV Corps was allotted the following formations<sup>1</sup>:—

<sup>1</sup> Giffard's *Despatch*, covering period 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944, p. 1.



- 17th Indian Division (48th Indian Infantry Brigade and 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade);
- 20th Indian Division (less 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, which joined at the end of November 1943);
- 23rd Indian Division;
- Chin Hills Battalion and Levies.

In addition, the following troops in India were assigned to the South-East Asia Command and were available as a strategic reserve for reinforcing any front as required:—

- Headquarters, XXXIII Corps, commanded by Lieut-General Stopford;
- 2nd British Division;
- 19th Indian Division (later substituted by the 25th Indian Division);
- 36th Indian Division;
- Special Force—later renamed the 3rd Indian Division, comprising the 14th, 16th and 23rd Infantry Brigades, the 77th and 111th Indian Infantry Brigades, and the 3rd (West African) Infantry Brigade;
- 50th Indian Tank Brigade;
- 3rd Special Service Brigade (the 5th Commando and 44th Royal Marine Commando).

Of the forces placed under the IV Corps, the Chin Hills Battalion and Levies were already operating in the Chin Hills area against Falam and Haka in November 1943. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 17th Indian Division was at Tiddim and the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 20th Indian Division was at Tamu, both being in contact with the Japanese. The rest were in Corps reserve.<sup>2</sup>

The Japanese forces were organised under a Burma Area Army with its headquarters at Rangoon. Under the Area Army was placed the *Fifteenth Army* with its headquarters at Maymyo and responsible for the defence of Central and North Burma.<sup>3</sup> The *Fifteenth Army*, formed on 12-13 November 1941 at Osaka in Japan, had been fighting in Burma since the very beginning and included veteran units like the 33rd and 55th Divisions.<sup>4</sup> In November 1943, the *Fifteenth Army* was composed of the 18th Division at Myitkyina, 31st Division at Wuntho, 33rd Division at Thetkegyin and 56th Division at Mangshih.<sup>5</sup> The 18th Division was opposing the advance of the American and Chinese troops in the Northern Combat Area Command, while the 56th Division was facing the Chinese

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Mountbatten's *Report*, map A, p. 243.

<sup>4</sup> History of the Japanese 15th Army; File No. 7720.

<sup>5</sup> Mountbatten's *Report*, chart I, p. 242.



armies in Yunnan. The *31st Division* was in Central Burma, and only the troops of the *33rd Division* were actually manning the front line outposts, strung out from Haka to Kalemmyo and Sittaung. These were no heavily-manned continuous front lines; instead, the opposing forces held strong-points and outposts and actual tactical contact was made by continuous patrolling of the intervening hills and jungles.

#### PLANS

During the period from November 1943 to February 1944, both the Allies and the Japanese were primarily engaged in preparing their respective plans for the major offensive in the spring of 1944. The Japanese were busy working out the detailed plans for their all-out attack against Imphal and Kohima. The Allies were finalising the main strategy for the South-East Asia Command and discussing the pros and cons of the "naval approach" and the "overland strategy". Hence these months saw only minor operations and jockeying for position.

The Allies had undoubtedly superior resources for the Central Front, which, if they could be brought to bear on the front line, would have facilitated advance. But General Giffard held that the line of communications was not adequate for the deployment and maintenance of the full Allied strength in Imphal or beyond. The hills between Imphal and Assam were acting as an embankment, behind which swelled the rising tide of Allied forces. But from this reservoir of strength only a trickle could reach the front through the small sluice-gate of the Dimapur—Imphal road. Therefore, General Giffard initially allotted only the following tasks to the IV Corps:—<sup>6</sup>

- (a) Clearing the Chin Hills as far as the foothills south-east of Tiddim.
- (b) Dominating the area between the Yu and Chindwin rivers, south of Tamu—Sittaung road.
- (c) Containing and killing the Japanese in the Kabaw valley and Atwin Yomas.
- (d) Pushing forces across the Chindwin if a favourable opportunity arose.

These operations had little strategic significance except as a useful preparation for the major offensive to be launched later on.

At about the same time, the Japanese were completing their plans for the offensive against Imphal. As a necessary preliminary the *33rd Division* was ordered in October 1943 to advance and capture the area Falam—Fort White and consolidate its position

<sup>6</sup> Giffard's *Despatch*, op. cit., p. 11.



there.<sup>7</sup> Capture of this area was calculated to bring the Japanese within striking distance of Tiddim and its main line of communication to Imphal. If the manoeuvre drew forward further troops from the IV Corps to the Tiddim area, they would be cut off there when the main Japanese offensive opened and Imphal would be taken more easily. In the Kabaw Valley, apparently, the Japanese troops were required only to consolidate their position and to prevent the Allied troops from collecting intelligence and identifying Japanese units.

#### OPERATIONS

On the Central Front, there were two distinct sectors of operations, viz. the Tiddim sector, and the Tamu sector. The Japanese offensive subsequently opened a new sector near Ukhrul—Kohima, but in the autumn and winter of 1943-44 there were few contacts between the opposing forces north of Tamu.

##### *The Tiddim Sector*

During October 1943, the Japanese had stepped up their activities in the area east and north-east of Falam. One battalion of the 214th Regiment of the 33rd Division infiltrated south through the posts of the Chin Levies in small parties and captured Falam, about 74 miles south of Tiddim by road, on 7 November 1943. Webula was occupied about the same time by another battalion of the 214th Regiment, which then linked up with the Falam garrison. Haka was entered by the Japanese on 11 November 1943, after they had captured Pioneer Camp, 10 miles to the north of Haka, the previous day.<sup>8</sup> Moreover the Japanese troops had established themselves north of this area on the spur overlooking Ngazang, on Vownalu, Dolluang and below Monglang.

To check further advance of the Japanese and to stabilise their own position, the Indian units were quickly adjusted. The 1st Battalion of the 4th Gurkha Rifles concentrated along the track from Kennedy Peak to Dolluang, east of Kennedy Peak. 1/3 Gurkha Rifles dug itself in at Fort White with a company on Ngazang spur, and 1/10 Gurkha Rifles held small picquets in the Tiddim area. Two companies of 1/3 Gurkha Rifles also attacked the Japanese positions on Ngazang spur but after heavy fighting were forced to withdraw. They then took up positions blocking any possible Japanese move from Ngazang to the Fort White—Bamboo Camp road.<sup>9</sup> After this, the position was stabilised for

<sup>7</sup> Bulletin No. 240 of South-East Asia Translation and Interrogation Centre being translation of *Essays produced by Lt.-Col. Fujiwara Iwaichi*.

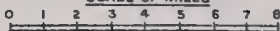
<sup>8</sup> IV Corps Weekly Intelligence Summaries, Nos. 75-77; HQ IV Corps, "G" Branch, War Diary for November 1943.

<sup>9</sup> *History of 17th Indian Division*, July 1941 to December 1945, p. 31.



## DISPOSITIONS MID NOVEMBER 1943

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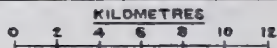


DISPOSITIONS OF JAPANESE FORCES.

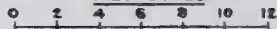
DISPOSITIONS OF JAPANESE FORCES.

ADVANCE OF JAPANESE FORCES...

SPOT HEIGHTS SHOWN THUS ▲ IN FEET.



KILOMETRES





some time and only vigorous patrolling was carried out by both parties.

So far only the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 17th Indian Division had been operating in the Tiddim area commanded by Brigadier A. E. Cumming, V.C., O.B.E., M.C. The divisional headquarters and the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade had been resting and training in the hills around Shillong. On 13 November 1943, the whole of the 17th Indian Division, except one battalion, started moving down to the front and the divisional headquarters was opened the same day at Tiddim. The 17th Indian Division had only two infantry brigades, a reconnaissance battalion and a defence battalion, and was so equipped that it could operate both on and off the road. To make up the shortage of one battalion, the division had under it the 1st Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment from the 23rd Indian Division. This battalion was posted at milestone 22 between Kennedy Peak and Fort White.<sup>10</sup> The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade took up positions between Imphal and milestone 109 on the Tiddim road. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade moved its headquarters to Dimlo on the road between Tiddim and Kennedy Peak.

On its arrival in the Tiddim area, the 17th Indian Division was given the task of securing the area bounded by Tiddim, Kahgen, (north-east of Tiddim) Vital Corner, and Kennedy Peak. At the same time, preparations were to be made for a major advance. In the first week of November 1943, the Commander 17th Indian Division was ordered by the IV Corps to carry out aggressive patrolling and to prepare plans for an advance on Kalembo from the Tiddim area. In turn, he ordered the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade to hold forward positions at Kennedy Peak, Vital Corner and Kahgen. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was posted so as to destroy any hostile force penetrating towards Tiddim or towards the road from Tiddim to Dimlo, south-east of Tiddim.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile the Japanese had struck. A platoon post of 1/16 Punjab at point RU 2774 came under heavy mortar fire at 2330 hours on 12 November 1943.<sup>12</sup> At 0315 hours on 13 November 1943, the Japanese attacked the post with a force estimated at the time to be at least two companies, but were repulsed with heavy loss. Two platoons were then sent in as reinforcements for the post, and the Japanese firing stopped at 0915 hours on the same day. But at 0300 hours on 14 November, the Japanese renewed their attack. The

<sup>10</sup> Milestone 22 was sometimes called milestone 52 also as it was 22 miles from Tiddim and 52 miles from Falam, the district headquarters. The actual milestone probably read "Tiddim 22" on one face, and "Falam 52" on the other.

<sup>11</sup> "Outline Narrative of Operations in Assam and Burma, 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944"; File No. 8621.

<sup>12</sup> War Diary of 63rd Brigade, August 1943 to January 1944.



*215th Regiment* of the Japanese *33rd Division* attacked  $1/3$  Gurkha Rifles on Ngazang Spur and infiltrated to the road west of the Gurkha positions. At the same hour,  $1/16$  Punjab at milestone 22, on the road between Fort White and Kennedy Peak, reported heavy Japanese attacks and sought help from  $1/10$  Gurkha Rifles at Kennedy Peak. As the day broke on 14 November, confused and savage fighting continued on the road between milestones 22 and 20, the Japanese *215th Regiment* assaulting the  $1/16$  Punjab and  $1/3$  Gurkha Rifles positions. By 1340 hours that day, both the positions were overrun by the Japanese. The Indian and Gurkha troops were dispersed but re-assembled at Kennedy Peak later in the day. Their casualties were light while the Japanese had lost many men, but the vital line of communication to Fort White was cut by them. The position at Fort White became untenable and was evacuated.

In the Haka-Falam area, the Japanese had carried their initial advance to a few miles west of the towns, but then the position stabilised. Outside Haka, the Japanese occupied positions up to 8 miles west, near Klangklang, and 4 miles west of Falam on the road to Klan. They experienced considerable difficulty in transporting or obtaining supplies in that inhospitable region, and, by early December 1943, considerably reduced their forces in this area. After capturing Fort White, the Japanese reverted to the defensive for several months. They busied themselves in digging strong trenches and fox-holes and consolidating their hold over the newly-won ground. The milestone 22 was a commanding feature with an altitude of 8225 feet and dominated the surrounding area. The Japanese honey-combed it into a formidable stronghold.

On the other side, the Allies built up their strength and prepared to push back the Japanese from the vital area of milestone 22—Fort White—Pimpi—Point 5151. They carried out vigorous and aggressive patrolling to keep contact with the hostile force and to acquire information. In these innumerable patrol actions, the Indian troops generally had the better of their opponents. On 28 November 1943, a more important effort was made to recapture Pimpi and Point 5151 from the Japanese. At 0720 hours that day,  $1/4$  Gurkha Rifles of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade attacked the positions, which were defended by approximately one company supported by six medium machine-guns. The main Japanese positions were sited on the top of a sugar-loaf hill, and consisted of numerous bunkers, a few snipers on trees and a barbed wire fence surrounding them.<sup>13</sup> The Gurkhas stormed their way some distance into the defended area, but came under fire from the Japanese mortars and 105-mm

<sup>13</sup> War Diary of 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade, Situation Reports, 1600 hours, 28 November and 2000 hours 29 November; also "Notes on Point 5151-Pimpi operations, 28 November 1943", File No. 8763.



howitzers from Fort White and Vownalu. The Japanese held out in their strong bunkers, and at midday on 28 November 1943, the Gurkhas started withdrawing. Numerous casualties were inflicted on the Japanese, but the attack had failed.

About the end of November, reports from patrols and forward observation posts indicated that the Japanese *1/215th Regiment* had withdrawn to Pimpi and Dolluang with a small outpost below Monglang. The *3/215th Regiment* had entered Fort White after its evacuation by *1/3 Gurkha Rifles* and two of its companies then held milestone 22 and Vaona Ridge, one mile north-west of Vownalu.<sup>14</sup> Another Japanese company had been sent to operate in the Lophei area, east of Fort White. This company was harassed and kept on the move by the Allied artillery fire, but finally succeeded in digging itself in firmly on Lophei Spur, from where it shielded effectively the main Fort White position against direct attack from the west.

On the Allied side, by the end of November 1943, the 14th Indian Division had concentrated in the Tiddim area. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade took its position 6 miles to the south of Tiddim,<sup>15</sup> along with the divisional artillery, except for one battery of 129 Field Regiment, which was taken to Kennedy Peak on jeep axles. 7/10 Baluch took over the defence of Saizang, and 4/12 Frontier Force Rifles was placed at Dimlo and Suangpi. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was concentrated at and near Kennedy Peak. A screen of observation posts manned by the 82nd Anti-Aircraft/Anti-Tank Regiment and known as the "Artforce", covered Tiddim from attack from the east, and the 1st West Yorkshire Regiment with one company of Frontier Force Rifles was holding Tongzang and positions to the east of it.

This was the situation in December 1943, when operation "Pumpkin" was planned for ejecting the Japanese from their positions at milestone 22. The recapture of this point, it was hoped, would lay Fort White open to attack from the north along the main road, and also clear the Japanese from the main ridge between the Kabaw Valley and the Chin Hills.

According to the "Preliminary Moves—Operation Pumpkin", notified on 9 December 1943, and the 63rd Brigade Operation Order No. 1, dated 12 December 1943, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was detailed to carry out the assault and the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was made responsible for the defence of the Kennedy Peak area. Apart from the troops of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade, the following units were also placed under it for the operation:—<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *History of 17th Indian Division*, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> War Diary 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade.



- Two sections 70 Field Company ;
- Medium Machine-Gun Platoon of 1 West Yorks ;
- Detachment Bearer Company ;
- A Company 1 West Yorks ;

In addition the following units were detailed for the support of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade throughout the operation:—

- Headquarters Royal Artillery, 17th Indian Division ;
- 493rd Field Battery ;
- 29th Mountain Regiment minus Mortar Battery ;
- One section of 311th Field Battery for counter-battery work<sup>17</sup> ;
- Bearer Company (less detachment) ;
- Detachment Field Ambulance Troops ;
- Company 37th Field Ambulance ;
- Air support as available.

The plan was to box in and clear the Japanese from successive areas along the top of the ridge, to seize the main Japanese positions at milestone 22 and then, circumstances permitting, to exploit the success by a rapid thrust to Fort White. A company of 1/4 Gurkha Rifles was to hold milestone 22 positions and another company was detailed a little further back in order to counter-attack the Japanese troops trying to recapture milestone 22.

The attack started at 0730 hours on 14 December 1943. 1/3 Gurkha Rifles led the assault along the top of the ridge, followed by 1/4 Gurkha Rifles and covered by a heavy barrage of artillery fire. But things went wrong from the very beginning. Time after time 1/3 Gurkha Rifles charged up the crest of the hill and came within a few yards of the Japanese bunkers. But the Gurkhas were met by withering fire from medium machine-guns from the supporting bunkers. As usual, the defenders' fox-holes were mutually supporting and their machine-guns were sited with consummate skill. Moreover, the Gurkhas were shelled by mortars from the opposite slope and from Fort White, which prevented them from neutralising the milestone 22 positions. After holding all day to the bare hill-side and being unable to make further progress, 1/3 Gurkha Rifles was ordered to withdraw and the attack was called off. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was withdrawn to the rear positions, 6 miles south of Tiddim and the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was left in the Kennedy Peak area.

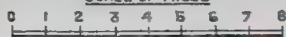
After the failure of the attack on milestone 22 on 14 December 1943, both sides reverted to intensive patrolling and minor actions. The area south of Tiddim had been comparatively quiet so far. South of the positions of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade a detachment of Chin Battalion with Levies, called "Chinforce", maintained a

<sup>17</sup> Counter-battery work: the use of artillery to destroy enemy artillery.



OPERATIONS. FEB. AND EARLY MAR. 1944

SCALE OF MILES

DISPOSITIONS OF ALLIED FORCES 

DISPOSITIONS OF JAPANESE FORCES

ADVANCE REALLIED FORCES

ADVANCE OF JAPANESE FORCES.

SPOT HEIGHTS SHOWN THUS: IN FEET



KILOMETRES





screen of observation posts. Further south and on the right flank of Chinforce, Chin villagers led by Lieut.-Colonel Stevenson operated against the Japanese. These troops, known as the "Chinwags", carried out a series of daring raids and successful ambushes in the second half of January 1944 against the Japanese in the area round Bamboo Camp (U 2060), killing many and capturing many valuable documents. In retaliation, two Japanese columns advanced, one from Fort White and the other from Webula towards Vazang. The first Japanese column ran into a position held by 7 Baluch above Mualbem, and delivered three strong attacks, being repulsed each time, with severe loss. But the second Japanese column from Webula scattered the Levies and Chinforce and established outposts along the Falam road to prevent further raids to the east.

In the meanwhile, the 17th Indian Division decided to surround the Japanese on Lophei Spur and liquidate them, and orders were accordingly issued on 20 January 1944.<sup>18</sup> The recapture of Fort White was still the major Allied objective, but the Lophei position had to be reduced first as it shielded Fort White from the west. But the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade which was commissioned to do the job had bitter experience of frontal attacks against a well prepared Japanese position. Hence it was decided to surround the position and starve the garrison out. Accordingly, two companies of 4 Frontier Force Rifles advanced from the east and two companies of 1/3 Gurkha Rifles operated from the south-west and established themselves on the Lophei Spur behind the main Japanese positions. Thereafter, they proceeded to encircle the defenders with minefields and booby-traps covered by light machine-guns on all sides. At the same time, strong fighting patrols operated in the valleys to cut off the Japanese forces from all sources of water or supplies. They were also harassed continuously by artillery fire and "jitter raids" to deny them rest. The Japanese position soon became untenable, but, on the night of 12-13 February 1944, they succeeded in cutting their way out of the ring and thus escaped. Lophei Spur position was thereupon occupied by the Indian troops.

Meanwhile, the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was operating actively against a Japanese position at milestone 22. This brigade had left Shillong on 3 November 1943, and arriving at milestone 109 on Imphal-Tiddim road on 9 November 1943, opened its tactical headquarters at Tiddim on 15 November. On 10 December 1943, the brigade was charged with the defence of the whole ridge from Saizang to Kennedy Peak so as to free the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade for operation "Pumpkin", described earlier, and took over

<sup>18</sup> 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operation Order Nos. 4 and 5, War Diary of 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade.



the area by 12 December 1943.<sup>19</sup> About the end of December 1943, the Commander 17th Indian Division was planning to attack the Japanese positions at Dolluang and capture that locality as a preliminary to an attack on the main Japanese lines of communication at Stockades 2 and 3. Intensive patrolling was carried out to probe into the strength and dispositions of the opposing force but, on 12 January 1944, the plan was given up. Dolluang was a well-prepared position held by at least one Japanese company, and the Commander 17th Indian Division felt that three battalions must be employed in the attack to give good chances of success.<sup>20</sup> This would have left the rest of the front denuded of troops, and there were administrative difficulties also. It was decided, therefore, to bend all efforts towards the recapture of milestone 22 position only.

To begin with, troops were concentrated forward of Kennedy Peak in the beginning of February 1944. The Sappers improved the road so that 3-ton trucks might be taken up to Kennedy Peak, where medium guns also were carried. With these and the field guns already at Kennedy Peak, the whole Japanese position at milestone 22 was heavily bombarded. The jungles covering the top of the ridge and its eastern slope were laid flat and many of the bunkers were destroyed.<sup>21</sup> Then the infantry moved forward to positions covering the ridge from Kennedy Peak to milestone 21. The plan was to bite off the positions supporting milestone 22 one after the other, thus weakening the main milestone 22 position and facilitating its capture. The first effort was to be made against Vaona ridge to the east of milestone 22. At 1600 hours on 6 February 1944, the attack was launched, supported by mortars and 2-pounder and 6-pounder anti-tank guns.<sup>22</sup> 1/7 Gurkha Rifles stormed up the steep slope on the northern side of Vaona ridge and reached the top. The Gurkhas were met by heavy Japanese fire from the bunkers there, but they dug themselves in just below the crest, at some places only 30 yards from their opponents. A company of Dhotiyal porters supplied them up the steep slope, till at 0945 hours on 7 February the track was made fit for mules up to the Regimental Aid Post. Patrols went round to the other side of the Japanese positions and the troops of 9 Border (Regiment) destroyed the bridge between Vaona and Pimpi over the Kwe Lui stream to prevent a counter-attack from that direction. Fearing encirclement the Japanese were at last compelled to abandon the position on Vaona and, by 1620 hours on 10 February 1944, the ridge was held by the Gurkhas. During the next few days, 1/7 Gurkha Rifles worked its way gradually to the south-east

<sup>19</sup> War Diary of 48th Indian Infantry Brigade, January 1942 to May 1944.

<sup>20</sup> DO letter dated 17 January 1944 from Lieut.-General Scoones to Lieut.-General Slim, File No. 8537, Vol. III.

<sup>21</sup> *History of 17th Indian Division*, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> War Diary of 48th Indian Infantry Brigade for February 1944, Appendix D



of milestone 22, establishing small positions as it advanced. These forward positions commanded the greater part of the slope behind milestone 22 and the track from Fort White.

Plans were then made for an attack on milestone 22 itself. Scheme "Rai" envisaged a two-day bombardment of the Japanese position by the divisional artillery, including 5.5" guns, 25-pounders, 3.7" guns, 2-pounder and 6-pounder anti-tank guns and mortars, followed by an assault delivered by two companies of 1/7 Gurkha Rifles and one company of 1/4 Gurkha Rifles. At the same time, one company was to stage a surprise attack against the Japanese line of communication at Vownalu between No. 2 Stockade and Fort White, and maintain itself astride the track for three days. This subsidiary operation, known as "Knock", could not be completed because the troops were prematurely discovered by the Japanese and the vital element of surprise was lost. The main assault on milestone 22 was delivered at about 1230 hours on 26 February 1944, after artillery preparation.<sup>23</sup> The companies of 1/7 Gurkha Rifles and 1/4 Gurkha Rifles established themselves in a portion of the main position, but could not clear it of the Japanese, who counter-attacked after midnight. The fighting was savage and confused in the extreme. Contact between the units was lost, and the top of the spur passed again into the hands of the defenders. Bitter fighting continued, till on the afternoon of 27 February the attacking Gurkhas were ordered to withdraw.

However, the slow encirclement of the position at milestone 22 from the south-east continued. On 1 March 1944, a successful ambush was staged at RU 326763 on the track between No. 3 Stockade and Pimpi by 9 Border, in which about 15 Japanese were killed. On 3 March, Wellington heavy bombers of the Royal Air Force bombed Fort White twice, but the bombing was not effective. On 5 March, the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade Operational Instruction No. 32 was issued to establish a road-block of barbed wire on the road between Fort White and milestone 22, so as to isolate the latter completely.<sup>24</sup> On 7 March, 9 Border had cut the vital line of communication of milestone 22 and ambushed a party of Japanese troops going from Fort White to that position. By next day, the road-block of barbed wire was completed, and milestone 22 was isolated from Fort White. It was obvious that, in due course, the position which had defied the 17th Indian Division for three long months would have fallen into its hands.

But the storm broke before that. Even while the Allied troops were drawing their net around milestone 22 the Japanese were

<sup>23</sup> Appendix R, to War Diary of 48th Indian Infantry Brigade for February 1944.

<sup>24</sup> Appendix B, to War Diary of 48th Indian Infantry Brigade for March 1944.



infiltrating in strength westward across the Manipur river and northward against the main line of communication from Imphal. The 17th Indian Division, therefore, had to forego the prize within its grasp, and pull out north to fight the decisive battle on the Indian soil, as described in the chapters following.

In operations in the Tiddim area in the winter of 1943-44, neither side gained decisive advantage. The 17th Indian Division did not succeed in its plan of closing in round Kalembo. But it established some ascendancy in patrol actions and inflicted numerous casualties on the Japanese. The Japanese, on the other hand, could inflict no major defeat on their opponents, nor could they pin down the 17th Indian Division so as to delay seriously its withdrawal northward in March 1944. With its accustomed skill, the Japanese 33rd Division pushed back the British and Indian troops from Ngazang and other localities threatening Kalembo, and captured Fort White. But it had to evacuate Lophei Spur and was losing its grip on the milestone 22 position when the curtain was rung down on these preliminary operations. The contest proved not unequal, and the honours were shared.

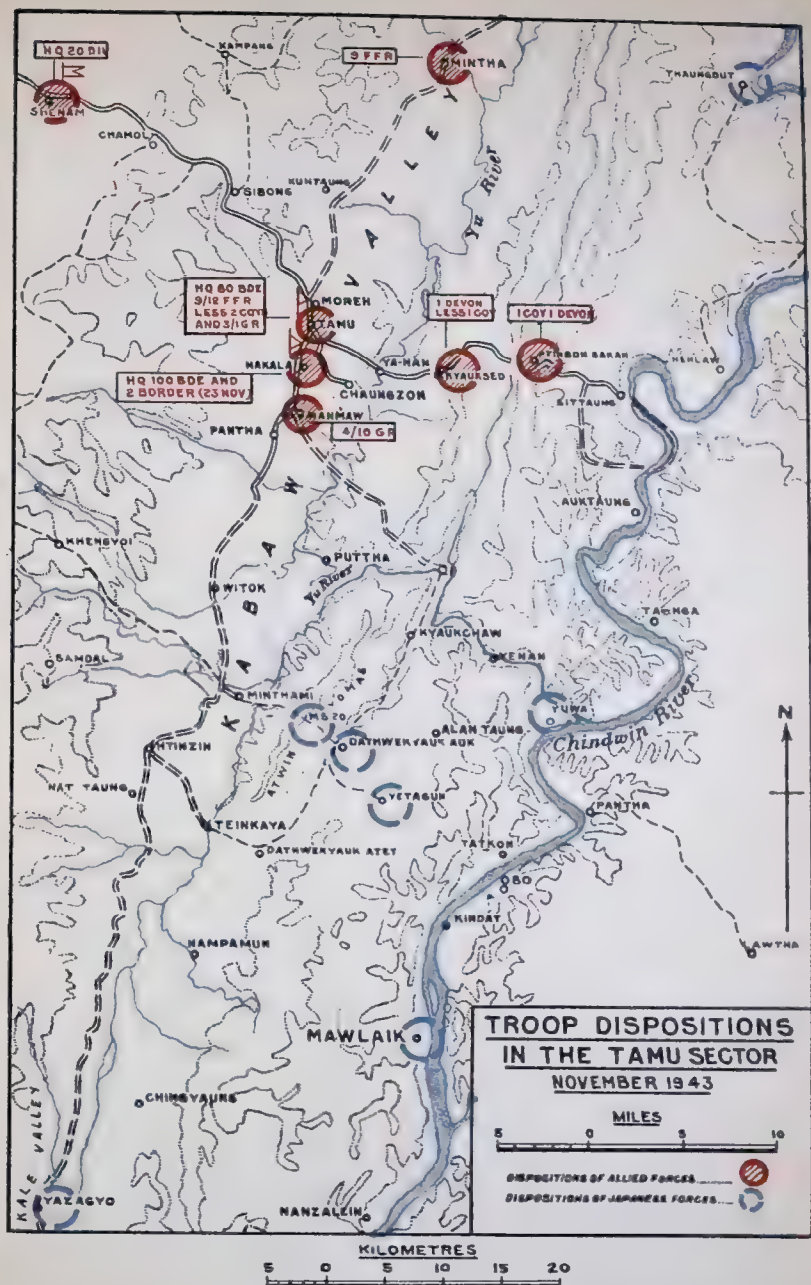
### *The Tamu Sector*

At the beginning of November 1943, there was no front line in the Kabaw valley and the Tamu sector. The opposing forces held their respective outposts very lightly and were content to let the other side stage an advance if it so desired. The Japanese outposts started from Singkaling Hkamti, and were situated well to the east of the river Chindwin till Yuwa was reached, which was situated at the mouth of the Yu river, and was the first important post held by the Japanese on the west bank of the Chindwin. Southwards of Yuwa, the Japanese outposts were situated on the Atwin Yomas separating the Chindwin from the Kabaw valley. The Allied posts were situated mainly along the Imphal-Tamu-Sittaung road and along the subsidiary roads leading from Tamu north to Mintha and Thanan, and south through the Kabaw valley towards Kalewa.

With the arrival of the campaigning season, the Allied troops advanced to man their front-line posts, in November 1943, with the 20th Indian Division in the van. On 4 November 1943, one company of 1 Devon was sent forward to Pyinbon Sakan on the Tamu—Sittaung road, and the rest of the unit halted at Kyauksedi, about 14 miles nearer Tamu on the same road.<sup>25</sup> On 8 November 1943, Headquarters 80th Indian Infantry Brigade opened near Tamu, and 9/12 Frontier Force Regt., less two companies, was moved to the same place. The next day, Headquarters 20th Indian Division

<sup>25</sup> Daily Situation Reports, Appendix C, to War Diary of Headquarters IV Corps.







opened at Shenam. 3/1 Gurkha Rifles moved forward to RP 7993 near Tamu, on 17 November 1943. About the same time, 4/10 Gurkha Rifles was sent to Manmaw, about 6 miles from Tamu on the southern road. The build-up of the Allied forces continued as the winter campaigning season approached, and Headquarters 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was moved to Nakala, about 2 miles south of Tamu, together with 2 Border, on 23 November 1943. On 26 November, one battery less one troop of 2nd Indian Anti-Tank Regiment joined them at Nakala. To the north of Tamu, Mintha was held by the 9th Battalion of F.F.R. Main Headquarters 20th Indian Division was at Shenam and Headquarters 23rd Indian Division, together with 1 Seaforth, was situated further back at 6½ miles from Imphal on the Imphal—Tamu road.

These troops were employed almost entirely in continuous patrolling. Since many miles of broken hills and dense forests separated the rival outposts, and neither party was prepared to attack the other in force, intensive patrolling was the only means of maintaining contact with the enemy and of obtaining intelligence of his moves and probable intentions. Detailed instructions were, therefore, issued on 7 November regarding the policy and method of patrolling in the sector.<sup>26</sup> The object was laid down as killing the maximum number of Japanese troops, maintaining initiative and obtaining information. A system was evolved for patrolling programmes to be notified to the divisional headquarters and for patrol reports to be submitted. On 12 November 1943, the 20th Indian Division front was ordered to be divided up into four sectors, namely (1) No. 3 Operations Area "V" Force, (2) Kalibahadur Regiment area, (3) the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade Group area and (4) the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade Group area.<sup>27</sup> The "V" Force was made responsible for the area in the north, on the west bank of the Chindwin facing Homalin and Tamanthi; and the Kalibahadur Regiment was charged with the defence of the area immediately to the west of it. The 80th Indian Infantry Brigade area included Pale—Tamu—Sittaung road, and Mintha—Thanan area to its north. The 100th Indian Infantry Brigade area started just south of Tamu and Nakala and included Minthami, Yuwa, Mawlaik, and all the southern portion of the Kabaw valley. North of Sittaung, there was hardly any close contact between the opposing forces, and both were content to send frequent patrols across the Chindwin. The Allied forces there were represented by the 9th Battalion of F.F.R. based on Mintha, and further north, a force of irregular tribesmen, called the "V" Force.

The Japanese troops in the Homalin—Tamanthi area belonged

<sup>26</sup> 20th Indian Division Operation Instruction No. 2 dated 7 November 1943.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*; 20th Indian Division Operation Order No. 2 dated 12 November 1943.



to the *18th Division* whose main strength was deployed in the Hukawng valley facing the Chinese and American troops advancing south from Ledo. The main Chindwin sector from Sittaung to Mawlaik and Kalewa was held by the units of the *33rd Division* which was also responsible for the Tiddim—Falam—Haka area.

The Japanese carried out periodical sweeps of the Kabaw valley from their positions in the Atwin Yomas to the east. In the beginning of November 1943, reports were received that they had established new posts at Teinkaya and Motimbya in the Kabaw valley itself, and that a Japanese patrol had visited Htinzin. These reports would indicate that the Japanese wanted to establish a line of defended posts across the Kabaw valley in order to prevent any Allied advance towards the south.<sup>28</sup> But Allied patrols reported on 7 and 9 November that Teinkaya and Htinzin were both clear of the Japanese. Other patrols early in November had found no trace of the Japanese at Puttha, Witok, Kameik, Maw, Nangadeik and Nat Taung. But another patrol found 70 to 100 Japanese troops at RP 799532 on the track from Mawku and Minthami. Yetagun was also found strongly held by the Japanese, and it was estimated that they had deployed at least one company along the track.

Along with the Allied patrol activity, work on the existing roads and tracks had also continued. By the middle of November 1943, the bridge on the Yu river was completed and 3-ton trucks could go eight miles from Tamu on the Sittaung road. The Tamu-Kalewa road was made fit for 3-tonners to Manmaw, for 15-cwt. vehicles to Nanayaung Chaung and for jeeps up to Naneka Chaung near Witok. By the end of November, the Tamu—Sittaung road was made "jeepable" up to Pyinbon Sakan and the road from Tamu north to Thanan was also made jeepable.<sup>29</sup>

During December 1943, the build-up of the 20th Indian Division continued steadily. On 2 December, the 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment's patrol base moved from Mintha, some 3 miles north-west to Yangou-pokpi, and on 11 December, 3/1 Gurkha Rifles relieved 4 Madras at RP 9188 on the Tamu—Sittaung road. On the same date, 9/14 Punjab completed its concentration at Imphal prior to moving up. Between 18 December and 22 December, the third brigade of the division, the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, concentrated at Moreh roadhead near Tamu. The Moreh position was gradually developed into the most important administrative and supply centre of the front. It held considerable engineering stores, supply dumps etc., and was prepared fully as a defended locality. On the arrival of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade at Moreh, the 80th Indian

<sup>28</sup> Appendix D to Weekly Intelligence Summaries for November, War Diary of Headquarters IV Corps.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*



Infantry Brigade moved on to the Yu river at RP 8788, towards Sittaung. 4 Madras, less two companies, was placed temporarily under the command of the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade on 19 December, but reverted to the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade on 24 December 1943. On the same day, 1 Northhamptons took its place under the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>30</sup> On 31 December 1943, Headquarters 20th Indian Division itself moved up from Shenam to Sibong.

The tempo of operations also increased correspondingly during December 1943. In the Homalin—Tamanthi area, the Japanese strength was increasing, and, on 1 December, about 20 large boats were reported to have arrived at Pinma. On 9 December, V Force reported that the Japanese had crossed over to the west bank and had established small posts at Twetwa and Hivena and were harvesting the rice-crop at Nyaunggon. On the night of 9/10 December, a "V" Force Camp at SA 520020 was suddenly attacked by a force of about 50 Japanese and 50 pro-Japanese Burmans, who drove out the "V" force levies and burnt the camp. A similar attack was carried out by the Japanese on Manpa Camp on the night of 23-24 December.<sup>31</sup> These activities clearly indicated that the Japanese in that area had received some reinforcements, though they returned to the east bank of the river after every major sortie.

These increased Japanese activities did not escape notice at the Allied headquarters. As early as 19 November 1943, General Staff, 11th Army Group, addressed the Fourteenth Army regarding the possibility of a Japanese Long Range Penetration Group cutting the Kohima—Imphal road.<sup>32</sup> In their appreciations of 21 November and 13 December 1943, Headquarters Fourteenth Army agreed with the 11th Army Group. It was considered that, since the Japanese had then a total of five divisions available in Burma, they could employ nearly a regiment for their thrust against Imphal's line of communication. But at the same time, it was considered unlikely that the Japanese Long Range Penetration Group would consist of more than one battalion, supported by sappers, some Burmans and Indian National Army troops. Since the attack would of necessity develop suddenly, it was obvious that it would have to be countered by the available IV Corps troops without waiting for reinforcements from outside. To enable the IV Corps to deal with any such threat promptly and efficiently, the Fourteenth Army recommended the despatch of one motorised battalion to Imphal, but nothing appears to have been done in the matter.

<sup>30</sup> War Diary, HQ IV Corps, "C" Branch for December 1943, appendices A and D.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*; also War Diary of Headquarters 20th Indian Division for December 1943.

<sup>32</sup> "Operations IV Corps", File No. 8537..



South of Homalin also, Japanese activity had increased in December 1943. Early in that month, a new Japanese-built jeep track from Gwedaukkon (SF 2760) to SF 200570 was discovered by the Allied patrols. Then, about the end of the first week of December 1943, alarming reports were received that about 300 Japanese had crossed over to the west bank of the Chindwin, near Auktaung, with the probable object of attacking Pyinbon Sakan. A screen of patrols drawn from 1 Devon was immediately thrown to the south of Pyinbon Sakan, at SL 000839, RP 870865 and SL 016925. Another patrol was sent towards Sittaung and was fired upon by the Japanese troops from Thazi on 9 December 1943. Further south, other patrols reported that there were no Japanese troops at Genan on the Yu river on 9 December 1943. But some 8 miles further up the Yu river, the Japanese were building strong bunkers at Kyaukchaw and at RP 800539, on the track from Minthami to Mawku. On 8 December 1943, a patrol visited the latter position and shot up some Japanese troops encountered near it. An Allied patrol on 16 December found Kyaukchaw held by some 120 Japanese troops, 50 of whom were found on guard and alert to fight, while the rest were working on the bunkers.<sup>33</sup> These patrols confirmed the presence of *16th company 215th Regiment* in the Atwin Yomas. Kyaukchaw and RP 800539 positions were kept under observation by frequent patrols, and on 29 December, it was found that at Kyaukchaw the Japanese had prepared positions on both the banks of the Yu river. The positions on the left bank were held by one platoon, while the main position on the right bank was garrisoned by one company.

In the main Kabaw valley and to the west of it, patrolling was continued with the object of inflicting casualties and "pin-pointing" the positions of the Japanese. As a result of these patrols, Holkolm, Tolbung, Aihol and Lenikot, all situated in the hills to the west of Kabaw valley, were found clear of the Japanese troops. This was reassuring, for it showed that they were not secretly infiltrating over the hills towards Imphal—Tiddim road or the Manipur valley. The southern Kabaw valley, however, and the hills on both sides of it, were held firmly by the Japanese. Their posts were found at RP 5104 and RK 4996, five and ten miles south-west of Yazagyo, and near Balbil, about 18 miles south-west of Minthami. In the Kabaw valley itself, the Japanese had occupied Teinkaya and Nat Taung, supported by the main posts at Dathwekyauk Atet and Dathwekyauk Auk. Teinkaya was bombed successfully by the Allies on 17 December. The Japanese dominated Minthami, and Htinzin, both of which were in the 'no man's land' between the rival outposts. Htinzin village was cleared of its inhabitants by the Japanese, in

<sup>33</sup> Appendices A and D to War Diary, Headquarters 20th Indian Division for December 1943.



order to obtain labourers and to prevent the Allies from making use of them. While evacuating these villages, the Japanese were ambushed by an Indian patrol on the night of 15/16 December, and suffered over 15 casualties.<sup>34</sup> Throughout the rest of the month, the Htinzin villages were found clear of the Japanese troops.

In January 1944, the 20th Indian Division prepared to advance south through the Kabaw Valley. Defence of the Tamu-Sittaung road and the area north of it was the responsibility of the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade and the V Force. South of the road, the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade operated along the Tamu-Kalewa road against the Japanese positions in the main valley.<sup>35</sup> The 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was placed between the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade and the Chindwin, operating towards Yuwa and Kyaukchaw. The tactical headquarters, two companies and 1 platoon of 3/8 Gurkha Rifles, 1 Northampton, one platoon of 9/14 Punjab, 8th and 31st Mountain Batteries and one troop of 231st Motor Battery were temporarily attached to the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade and reverted to the command of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade on 21 January 1944, during the Kyaukchaw operations. The Japanese were also reinforcing their troops on the Chindwin front. Early in January, it became definitely established that the Upper Chindwin sector had been taken over by the Japanese *31st Division*, and the few remaining units of the *18th Division* had left the front for the Myitkyina area. Then, on 27 January, some Japanese documents were captured which indicated that elements of a new Japanese division, the *15th*, had reached the front.<sup>36</sup> Units of this division took their positions between the *31st Division* in the north and the *33rd Division* in the south. The stage was being set for the big Japanese offensive.

In the Homalin—Tamanthi area, the Japanese movement and activity continued undiminished during January 1944. About the middle of the month reports were received of Pantha and Maingnyaung on the Chindwin being reinforced by them. Other reinforcements reached Mawlaik area also. About the same time, nearly 200 Japanese troops and 180 armed Burmans were seen near Ta-Nga, and were bombed from the air. On 15 January, R.A.F. Hurricanes on an offensive sweep from Thaungdut to Homalin detected considerable activity along the jungle tracks and found a large concentration of about 70 rafts at Nawngpu-Awng on the Uyu river. The planes swooped low to strafe the rafts and destroy them. On 16 and 18 January, the rafts were attacked again and again by

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> The 20th Indian Division Location Statement, 1 January 1944.

<sup>36</sup> Telegram No. I-1477 dated 29 January 1944 from IV Corps to Fourteenth Army, "Operations IV Corps", op. cit.



cannon-firing aircraft and were bombed with incendiary tins of oil, but it was difficult to destroy them while they were in the water. An air reconnaissance on 25 January showed them to be still at the same position and in the same numbers.<sup>37</sup> However, air strikes were not ineffective against the other targets in the area. About four battalions of the 31st Division, probably from the 58th and 124th Regiments, were estimated to be camped between Pantha and Tamanthi. Many casualties were inflicted on them by bombing and strafing, and, after air attacks a camp at Htinkingyaung, just south of Paungbyin, was also reported to have been shifted back eastward.

In the Yazagyo area just south of the Kabaw valley, a concentration of about a battalion of Japanese troops was reported at the beginning of January. It was feared that they might strike up the Kabaw valley or west towards Kahgen and the Imphal-Tiddim road. They were promptly and heavily attacked from the air which resulted in their dispersal. Mechanical transport traffic was also observed from Kalewa to Yazagyo at night, but no trace was found of the concentration of troops. Patrol clashes were frequent, with the British and Indian troops generally getting the upper hand. About the middle of the month, some Japanese troops were shot up by a Levy patrol east of Paidain. About the same time, another patrol encountered a Japanese party at Nangadeik and inflicted 25 casualties while suffering only 5 itself. The Japanese position at milestone 20 on the track from Minthami to Dathwekyauk Auk was being improved and fortified. Dathwekyauk Auk itself was believed to be a Japanese company headquarters and supplies were being sent on elephant-back from there to Kyaukchaw.

The most important operation during January 1944, however, was the capture of the Japanese position at Kyaukchaw. The plan for the operations provided for intensive bombing of the position for two days prior to the attack. Then a battalion of infantry was to move in to the attack while strong fighting patrols operated along the tracks leading from Kyaukchaw to Dathwekyauk Auk and to Yuwa, so as to prevent the Japanese garrison evacuating it or receiving reinforcements. At the same time, a force composed of 4 Madras was to stage a diversionary attack against Yuwa. D day was fixed for 15 January, and the patrols, called "stops", moved out from RP 8358 and reached their positions that day. The attack against Yuwa also was carried out on schedule. The bombing, however, could not take place that day due to bad weather and low visibility.<sup>38</sup> The weather remained forbidding the next day also, and things began to look dark, for the patrols were already in position

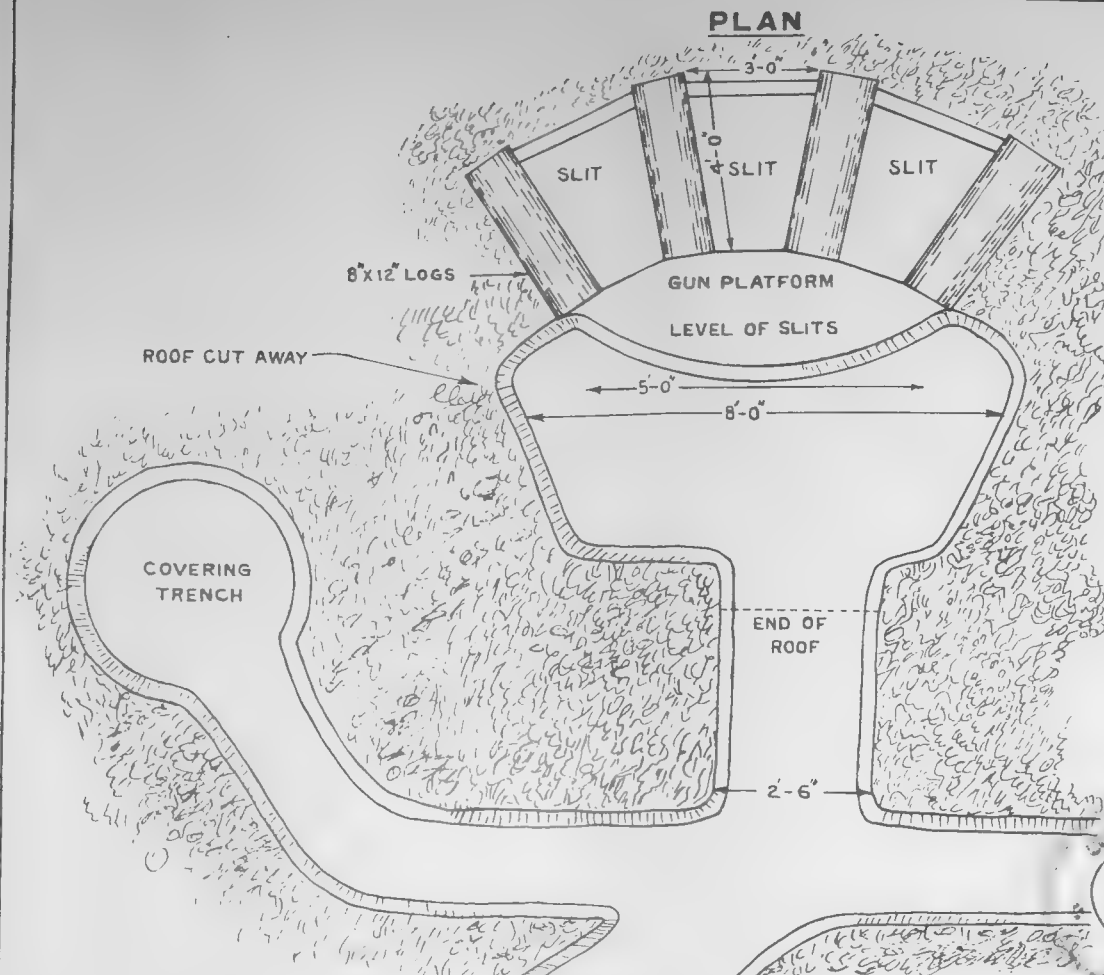
<sup>37</sup> IV Corps War Diary for January 1944, Appendix X; Weekly Intelligence Summaries.

<sup>38</sup> 20th Division Kyaukchaw Operation; File No. 8796.

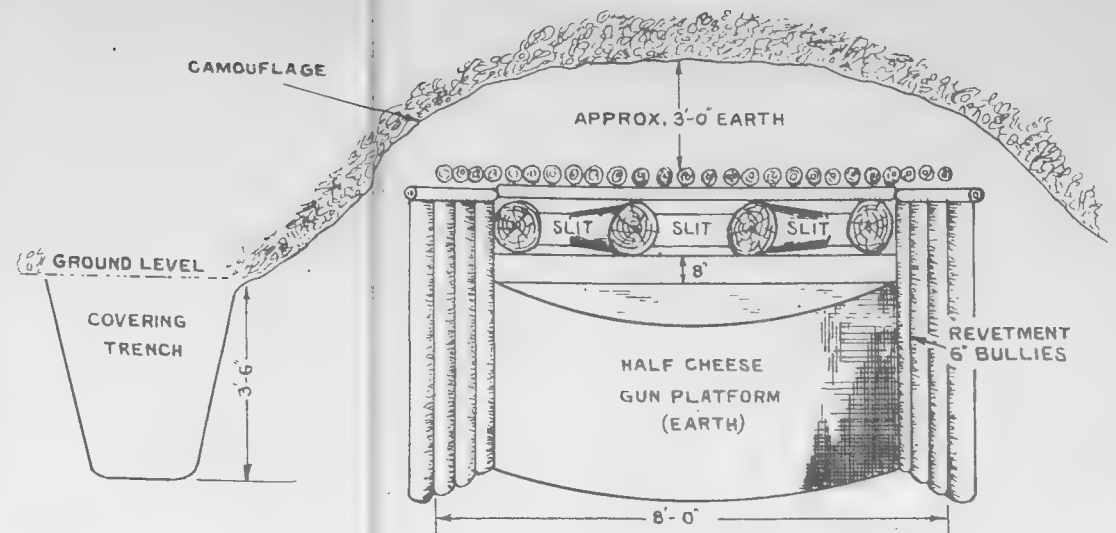


# A TYPICAL JAPANESE BUNKER (FOUND AT KYAUKCHAW) FEBRUARY 1944

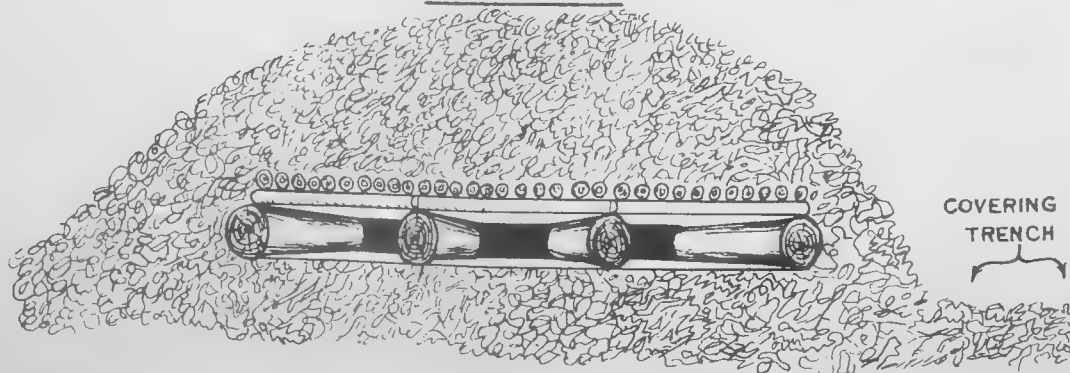
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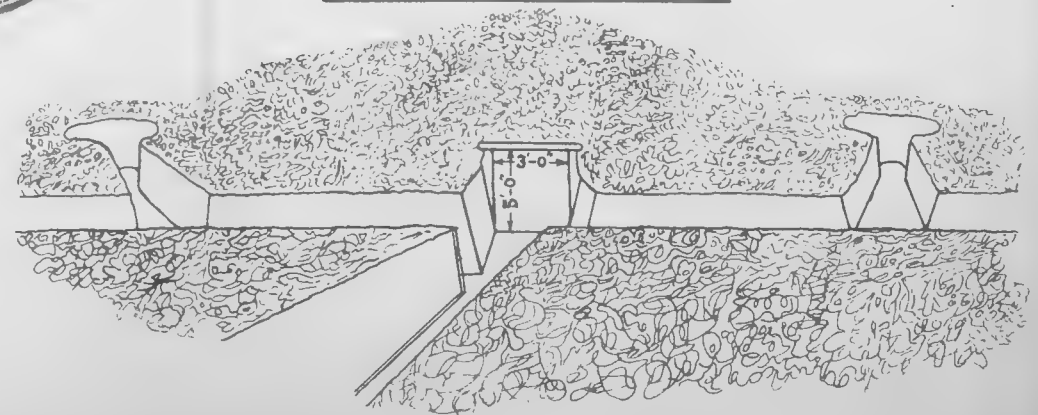
INTERIOR CROSS SECTION



FRONT VIEW



OBLIQUE VIEW FROM REAR





since 15 January and could not be informed of the change in the plans. It was decided then to concentrate the bombing in a few hours. But as mist and haze prevented air action in the morning in those steaming jungles, bombing started on the afternoon of 17 January and was finished at 1640 hours. Liberators, Mitchells, Vengeances and Hurribombers of the U.S.A.A.F. and R.A.F. dropped 90 tons of bombs on the Japanese positions.<sup>39</sup> The undergrowth and foliage of trees were completely destroyed, leaving the Japanese positions exposed and easily detectable. But the bunkers were not substantially damaged or destroyed, as was revealed later. After the bombing, daylight was too short to permit of a successful assault, and a night-attack was impracticable, so only patrols went in that night. The next day, 18 January, the infantry assault began. The main attacking force consisted of the following units:—

- One Section 92nd Indian Field Company
- Two batteries 23rd Mountain Regiment
- Headquarters and  $\frac{1}{2}$  troop, 231st Mortar Battery
- 1 Northhamptons
- Commando platoon 3/8 Gurkha Rifles.

The "stops", whose task was to keep the Kyaukchaw position isolated, comprised four platoons of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles. Besides, half troop 231st Mortar Battery, Tactical Headquarters, two companies and two platoons of 3/8 Gurkha Rifles and Commando platoon 4 Madras, were detailed for protection of the lines of communication of the attacking force and for the diversionary raid on Yuwa. 1 Northhamptons, the main assault unit, had only three companies in it, each with a strength of only about 82 bayonets. The Japanese defenders were less than a company in strength, probably not more than 40 to 50 men when the attack was delivered.

As the main attacking force advanced on the morning of 18 January, it soon found the going difficult due to the thick forest and broken ground. Contact was first made with the defenders at 1200 hours and 1 Northhamptons advanced slowly, supported by the batteries of the 23rd Mountain Regiment and 3-inch mortars. The Japanese bunkers were built on the top of steep slopes which were swept by light machine-gun fire, and hand grenades rolled down from the bunker-slits. Frontal attacks, therefore, were soon found to be costly, and, when an endeavour was made to encircle the whole position, it was found to be too extensive for effective encirclement by the available troops. However, by 1700 hours, No. 1 Company, operating on the right flank, reached near the fire-swept ridges on a level with the bunkers, and was then held up. But in the next twenty-four hours it had reached a ridge top 80 yards off the bunkers,

<sup>39</sup> Weekly Intelligence Summary for week ending 19 January 44, Corps War Diary for January 1944, Appendix X.



while No. 2 Company passed through it and established itself behind the Japanese position.<sup>40</sup> No. 3 Company was held in reserve. Throughout the night of 19/20 January, artillery and 3-inch mortars carried out harassing fire against the defenders. On 20 January, No. 1 Company held its position while No. 2 Company attacked from behind, but by 1315 hours the attack had come to a standstill. No. 1 Company and the platoon on the east bank also joined the attack, but by 1700 hours they were still outside the barbed wire obstacles that surrounded the bunkers. No. 1 and 2 Companies were then withdrawn for rest during the night of 20/21 January, while No. 3 Company kept in contact. More troops were immediately called for from the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade at Moreh, and meanwhile in the afternoon of 21 January the tired troops again occupied their forward positions. On 22 and 23 January, the attacking forces made no special effort, simply preventing the Japanese from getting out or having rest.

In the meanwhile, the outer "stop" had been having fair success. At 1200 hours on 18 January, the platoon of 1 Border ambushed a party of about 30 Japanese troops on the Kyaukchaw-Dathwekyauk Auk track, and at 1600 hours a party of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles also sprang an ambush at RP 893592, casualties being inflicted in both the actions. On the night of 18/19 January, a party of 9/14 Punjab was operating on the track along the Yu river from Kyaukchaw to Yuwa. This patrol ambushed a party of about 60 Japanese troops on the morning of 22 January, inflicting about 20 casualties. The latter appeared tired and worn out, and were proceeding from the direction of Kyaukchaw towards Yuwa. From later developments, it appears certain that these Japanese troops were a part of the Kyaukchaw garrison and had quietly slipped out from there during the night. On 22 January, a detachment of 3/8 Gurkha Rifles from the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was sent to relieve 9/14 Punjab. On 23 January, a patrol of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles also encountered a small party of Japanese troops on the Kyaukchaw-Dathwekyauk Auk track.

On 24 January, reinforcements from the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade kept arriving and plans proceeded apace for completing the ring round the Japanese positions. The same day, 9/14 Punjab patrol reached Kyaukchaw in the afternoon after being relieved, and found that though the fire from the Kyaukchaw defences had not diminished, it appeared probable that some of the defenders had already escaped. When patrols went forward, again in the early morning of 25 January, they discovered that the remaining defenders had also somehow slipped out during the night, and the bunkers

<sup>40</sup> "20th Division Kyaukchaw Operation", *op. cit.*



were empty. Thereupon the bunkers were occupied by 1 Northampton.

The capture of Kyaukchaw had been accomplished, but experience of the new technique did not prove very heartening. It was obvious that air attack had to be on a far heavier scale if bunkers were to be destroyed. The assault must be launched immediately after the air bombardment, while the defenders were still dazed by shell-shock. Otherwise, a frontal assault on a prepared position was bound to be very costly in casualties. The alternative of ringing in and starving out the defenders required an unduly large force and was bound to be a lengthy process, giving ample opportunities to the other Japanese forces to stage a counter-attack while the Allied troops were still locked in combat at a particular point. In short, a satisfactory antidote to the bunker, defended by the Japanese with their characteristic fanaticism, was still not in sight.

After the capture of Kyaukchaw, plans were made for following up the success without delay. The 20th Indian Division Operation Instruction No. 11, dated 26 January 1944, visualised the offensive in six phases, including the capture of Kyaukchaw, just completed.<sup>41</sup> After the seizure of Kyaukchaw, troops were to push forward south and seize the area of mile 23-24 on the track from Dathwekyauk Auk to Kyaukchaw, at approximately RP 8858. At the same time another contingent was to advance east down the Yu river and capture Ngahpun and Yen-an and infiltrate south towards the area of Alan Taung. Subsequently, phase three was to start, involving occupations of the area RP 6457, Sunle and Minthami, concurrently with the "boxing-in" of the Japanese stronghold at mile 20 on the Minthami-Dathwekyauk Auk track. On the completion of phase three, the next phase was to be carried out which involved softening up and starving out the Japanese garrison of milestone 20 (RP 8053) position. Phases five and six related to the capture of Dathwekyauk Auk and Yuwa respectively, detailed instructions for which were to be issued later. These operations were to be carried out by the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade and the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade while the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade would remain responsible for the security of the Palel-Tamu road and the area to its north.

Accordingly, troops advanced south and east from Kyaukchaw and, on 2 February 1944, occupied Ngahpun and Yen-an without opposition. Advancing south towards Dathwekyauk Auk, they encountered opposition near milestone 25 (RP 8959). Because of the thick jungle and dense vegetation, accurate pin-pointing of the Japanese positions was very difficult, but by 4 February reconnaissance had been completed and the troops proceeded to "box-in" or

<sup>41</sup> War Diary of 20th Indian Division for January 1944.



encircle the position. The next day, a patrol which had advanced further south ambushed a party of 60 Japanese troops near milestone 21 (RP 8755) inflicting some casualties on them. The Japanese party was proceeding north at the time, and was probably trying to reinforce the milestone 25 position. Several attempts by the encircled Japanese to break through were all frustrated. But when 9/14 Punjab staged an assault on 10 February in order to liquidate the position, two other Japanese positions in the area, which had not been detected so far, opened withering fire on them. Caught between these two fires, 9/14 Punjab was surprised and had to fall back when within sight of success.<sup>42</sup> Thereafter the siege of the position went on in a ding-dong fashion.

Meanwhile, the commander of the 20th Indian Division was constantly looking back over his shoulder to the increasing Japanese concentration along the Chindwin. Persistent reports were being received of more and more Japanese troops arriving in the Homalin-Thaungdut area. On 5 February, reliable reports came of 150 Japanese living in the hills near SL 3499 and another 150 near SL 3994, on the east bank of the Chindwin.<sup>43</sup> Near Nawngpu-Awng also there were 200 Japanese and yet another party of 150 was stationed at Hpanaing. The concentration of rafts at Nawngpu-Awng in the Uyu river continued undiminished in spite of the heavy air attacks against them. On 8 February, a slight increase in their numbers was noted at Nawngpu-Awng, and a large collection of bamboos to the west of this position, the rafts then numbering no less than 175 at Nawngpu-Awng itself. On 10 February, the Japanese were reported to be making a list of all the boats available on the east bank of the Chindwin and to be requisitioning bamboos from the villagers, presumably to construct more rafts. On 12 February, 5 large dug-outs were found being built at SL 055715 and there was an unusual number of small craft on the Chindwin. Moreover, the tracks on the east bank of the Chindwin were being feverishly improved by the Japanese, and mechanical transport was seen for the first time in daylight on 16 February on the road from Sitsawk to Nawngpu-Awng. About the same time, an important bridge was completed over the Uyu river near Nawngpu-Awng to connect this road to the Homalin area.<sup>44</sup>

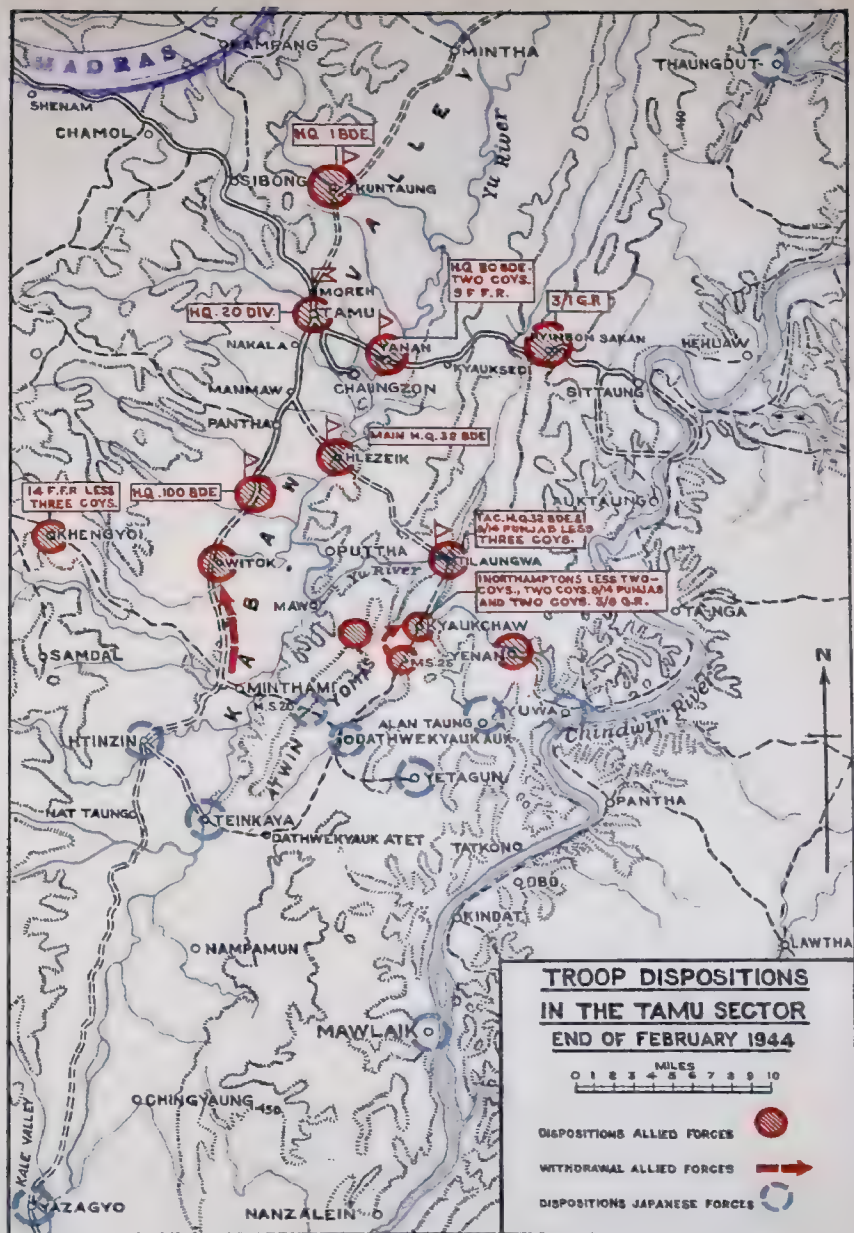
As a result of these ominous signs, instructions were issued to the 20th Indian Division to be ready to draw in its units for the defence of the vital Imphal—Tamu road and the Moreh base near Tamu, in case of a Japanese attack from the Homalin area. The

<sup>42</sup> 20th Indian Division's War Diary for February 1944.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, Intelligence Summary upto 1200 hours, 6 February 1944.

<sup>44</sup> War Diary of Headquarters IV Corps "G Branch" for February 1944; Intelligence Summaries.







20th Division Operation Instruction No. 13, dated 12 February 1944, and No. 16, dated 25 February, pointed out clearly that the vital task then was to defend the line of communication and the Tamu—Pyinbon Sakan area; and the 100th and the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigades were required, on a major threat developing,<sup>45</sup> to concentrate speedily, in this area. It became necessary, then, not to commit the troops to any locked combat, which might make it difficult to disengage and withdraw them immediately if required. On 16 February, therefore, the troops investing milestone 25 position (RP 8959) were withdrawn to a line due west from Ngahpun and the encircled Japanese were allowed to escape southwards.

In the rest of the sector, there were only the usual activities. Allied patrols carried out several raids on the east bank of the Chindwin near Homalin to gather information and inflict casualties. The Japanese reciprocated, but suffered several casualties and were repulsed in three separate attempts to cross over to the west bank between Ta-Nga and Thaungdut during the week ending 23 February. On 19 February the nearly completed bridge on the Uyu river near Nawngpu-Awng was bombed from the air and broken, after which, it appears, the Japanese resorted to using a movable floating bridge brought into position at night and hidden away during the day. In the Atwin Yomas to the east of the Kabaw Valley, the Japanese continued to strengthen their bunker positions. A minor engagement was fought at RP 8359, where the Japanese contested the occupation of Allied troops, but were repulsed on 20 February. On 11 February, Dathwekyauk Auk position was bombed heavily. Twelve "Hurribombers" dropped incendiaries, and were followed by 12 Hurricanes which dropped their long-range tanks full of petrol among the incendiaries to help the conflagration. Fifteen minutes later, 14 Vengeances bombed the position, most bombs falling in the target area and explosions being caused. Patrolling was actively continued, and on 12 February a patrol penetrated to Dathwekyauk Atet and found it clear of the Japanese, though there were signs of hostile activity near by. On 21 February, small parties of Japanese troops ventured near Kyaukchaw, but were driven off by shell-fire. On 22 February the forward troops of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade were withdrawn further north due to the threatening activity of the Japanese near Homalin. The same day, troops reported that the Japanese facing them in the Atwin Yomas appeared to belong to a new unit. They were taller than the average Japanese, wore new uniforms and employed different tactics, and it was presumed that they were men of the *15th Division* taking over from the elements of the *33rd Division*. On 22 February, the

<sup>45</sup> War Diary of the 20th Indian Division.



villages in the Minthami area were also evacuated, the villagers also being taken away to prevent their falling into Japanese hands. In the Yazagyo area, some traffic in mechanised transport and troop activity was noticed in the last week of February but there were no important developments.

The 23rd Indian Division also was prepared to meet the threatened Japanese offensive. On 7 February 1944, a warning order was issued to it to be ready to move up to the Kabaw Valley in case of a major Japanese crossing of the Chindwin.<sup>46</sup> The main headquarters of the division was at milestone 5/6 of the Imphal—Palel road (RK 3554), together with the divisional artillery and signals. The Headquarters 49th Indian Infantry Brigade was located at mile 36 on the Imphal—Ukhrul road, charged with the defence of the Kohima—Imphal road and to counter a possible Japanese attack westwards via Sangshak. Headquarters 37th Indian Infantry Brigade was situated at Shuganu, guarding the approaches to the Manipur plain from the south and ready to advance thence to the Tamu area, if required.<sup>47</sup> Headquarters of the newly arrived 1st Brigade was placed at milestone 109 on Kohima—Imphal road, but on 29 February 1944, it moved up to RK 8102 near Kuntaung. It was ordered to stage a feint across the Chindwin and deceive the Japanese into believing that considerable forces were ranged against them in that area and were about to invade the east bank of the river in strength.<sup>48</sup> The deception plan was to be in full tide about 10 March, and to subside by 16 March 1944. At the same time, the 1st Brigade was to form a mobile reserve available for counter-offensive action anywhere in the Kabaw Valley.

March 1944 opened with the reports of Japanese mechanical transport traffic even north of Yazagyo, and large herds of cattle being collected in the trans-Chindwin Homalin area.<sup>49</sup> It was surmised that the cattle were simply “rations on hoofs”, and strengthened the conviction of a Japanese offensive being imminent. It is clear, therefore, that the Allied troops had ample warning before the blow fell.

Thus, in the Tamu sector, the Allied troops had gained a substantial measure of success during the winter of 1943-44. The Japanese were prevented from making any important territorial gain and considerable casualties were inflicted upon them in minor actions. The Indian and British troops of the 20th Indian Division generally gained the upper hand in patrol encounters, and their

<sup>46</sup> War Diary of the 23rd Indian Division for February 1944.

<sup>47</sup> War Diary 23rd Indian Division, Location Statement correct upto 1800 hours 13 February 1944.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 23rd Indian Division Operation Instruction No. 5 dated 26 February and No. 6 dated 29 February 1944.

<sup>49</sup> War Diary of the 20th Indian Division for March 1944.



morale rose high. They succeeded largely in their allotted task of containing and killing off the Japanese troops in the Kabaw Valley and in obtaining early information of new Japanese troop concentrations. These minor advantages gained against a resolute and skilful enemy augured well for their showing in the desperate battles about to begin.



## CHAPTER XI

# The Storm Breaks

### THE STRATEGIC PICTURE IN MARCH

By the beginning of March 1944 the strategic picture had not changed much. In Europe, the Russian hordes were relentlessly chasing the invaders back into Germany. On 27 January 1944, a Special Order of the Day announced the final lifting of the Nazi blockade of Leningrad and on 1 March the Russian offensive surged across the Narva river.<sup>1</sup> Soviet armies were everywhere approaching their 1941 frontiers, as the Wehrmacht reeled back after each massive blow. In Italy, then converted into an ally of the United Kingdom and the United States, the opposing armies were located in bloody combat at the Anzio beach-head and along the Gustav Line. In the bitter cold, snow and mud, the Allied soldiers mounted attack after attack at Cassino hill, and, on 15 February, the famous Abbey was bombed and reduced to a rubble. Yet the tenacious Nazis hung grimly on. In the United Kingdom preparations were proceeding rapidly for the great invasion of the "Fortress Europe". Men, ships and supplies were being collected in the island. At the same time, the German occupied areas were being softened up by aerial bombardment. The 1000-bomber raids were becoming common. In the beginning of March, the bomber offensive reached new peaks of intensity, and attacks were started on French communication centres to paralyse German troop movements. In the Pacific zone too, the tide was clearly running in favour of the Allies. Powerful American "task forces" were ranging up and down the ocean from New Guinea to the Aleutians, destroying Japanese naval and air strength and capturing vital islands. On 16 February 1944, the important Japanese base at Truk was attacked from the air. Under cover of this diversion, United States Troops landed on Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshall Islands two days later. Though General MacArthur's troops were still busy in the New Guinea area and the Philippines was still a distant objective, the new technique of island-hopping had obviously proved a success.

In Burma, the outlook was hardly less rosy. In the northern front, the Chinese 22nd and 38th Divisions assisted by a brigade of American troops were advancing southwards through the Hukawng Valley. Opposing them was the famous Japanese 18th

<sup>1</sup> *Chronology of the Second World War*, published by the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1947.



*Division*, but they pressed slowly forward. They had already crossed the Patkai range separating Upper Assam from Burma, and had captured Shingbwiayang situated in the northern part of the Hukawng Valley. With the advantage of considerable numerical superiority and American equipment and training, and goaded on by the constant presence of General Stilwell himself in the front lines, they continued their advance and captured Maingkwan on 4 March 1944.<sup>2</sup> Behind them lay the Patkai range and the narrow ribbon of the Ledo road, and the inevitable jungle. Before them the going was easier, for only a low watershed divided the Hukawng Valley from the Mogaung Valley to the south, and the Japanese had already constructed a jeepable track across it. At the same time the Japanese were experiencing a shortage of mechanical transport and so were obliged to fight the main battle further south.<sup>3</sup> In these circumstances the American troops led by Brigadier-General Merrill executed a brilliant flank march and captured Walawbum behind the Japanese front early in March, thus trapping about 2000 Japanese troops. The prospects were distinctly brighter and General Stilwell looked forward to the occupation of Myitkyina and the whole of the surrounding area in the near future. Moves were also on foot to bring about an advance by the Chinese armies from Yunnan, so that the Japanese in North Burma might be forced to retreat due to this threat to their right flank. Moreover, the line of communication of the Japanese was to be cut and completely disorganised by the descent of General Wingate's airborne, air-supplied troops behind the Japanese forces fighting in the Hukawng Valley. This airborne invasion, named "Operation Thursday", was started on 5 March 1944, when the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was landed by gliders near Rail Indaw. During the subsequent weeks, this force was reinforced to a strength of four brigades transported by air, and another brigade which had marched secretly from Ledo, crossing the Chindwin near Singkaling Hkamti about 2 March. "Operation Thursday", together with the advance down the Hukawng Valley and from Yunnan, was designed to break up and disorganise the resistance of the Japanese forces north of Mandalay and to occupy the entire North Burma, thus reopening a land route into China via the Ledo and the old Burma roads.

To facilitate this grand design, an advance was carried out by the XV Corps in Arakan, calculated to suck up and keep engaged major Japanese reinforcements in the south. Advancing slowly down the Mayu Peninsula, the Allied troops captured

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Maingkwan was situated on the banks of the Tanai River in the heart of the Hukawng valley.

<sup>3</sup> Bulletin No. 240 of South-East Asia Translation and Interrogation Centre, being translation of *Essays produced by Lieut-Colonel Fujiwara Iwachi*, page 6.



Maungdaw on 10 January 1944. They continued onwards, till, on 4 February, the Japanese struck. A force of mobile troops led by Colonel Tanahashi swept round the left flank of the 7th Indian Division, took Taung Bazar by assault, and then, turning south, cut the main line of communication of the 7th Indian Division at Ngakyedauk Pass.<sup>4</sup> Another column struck out west to cut the Bawli Bazar—Razabil road, while a holding force pinned down the 7th Indian Division by frontal attacks. But, contrary to Japanese expectations, the encircled troops did not retire in disorder; they stayed, put in their defended "boxes" and were supplied by air. Though the Japanese 55th Division attacked ferociously and often, the defended Boxes were held. The attackers soon began suffering from lack of supplies and rations. Counter-attacking, the 26th Indian Division retook Taung Bazar on 10 February, and by 23 February the Japanese had begun to withdraw. The next day, the encircled 7th Indian Division was relieved by the 5th Indian Division advancing over the Ngakyedauk Pass. The dangerous Japanese counter-stroke had failed.

#### JAPANESE APPRECIATION AND PLANS

The Arakan counter-stroke was part of a bigger Japanese plan which envisaged an invasion of the mainland of India. Soon after the completion of the Japanese conquest of Burma, in June 1942, a certain Lieut-Colonel Hayashi had advocated an attack on Imphal. He considered that the Japanese should strike against India without giving time to the defenders to recuperate from their disastrous retreat, and Imphal's capture would rob them of the best base for launching a counter-offensive against Burma. The proposals were received favourably by the *Headquarters Southern Army* and the *Imperial Headquarters* at Tokyo, but were opposed by the local commanders, particularly the officers commanding the Japanese 33rd Division and 18th Division. The latter argued that the jungles of Burma were impassable for large bodies of operational troops and that any attack on Indian territory would provoke anti-Japanese feelings in India. About December 1942, therefore, the plan was abandoned. When in April 1943 the plan was revived, it secured the support of Lieut-General Mutaguchi, Commander of the 18th Division.<sup>5</sup> The exploits of the Chindits had convinced him that the jungle was not impassable for well-trained troops, and the leaders of the Indian National Army had repeatedly declared that they and their Japanese allies would be welcomed as liberators in India. In

<sup>4</sup> For details, see "*The Arakan Operations*" (Historical Section). The Commander of the forces engaged in the operation against 7 Ind. Div. was Major-General Sakurai, Divisional Infantry Commander, 55 Division.

<sup>5</sup> Bulletin No. 240 of SEATIC, op. cit. pp. 3-9.



view of these two major factors, Lieut-General Mutaguchi pressed for an attack to destroy the threat to Burma, rather than wait for the Allied attack and fight defensive battles on the thinly held fronts. He had been appointed the Commander of Japanese *Fifteenth Army* in March 1943, hence his views naturally carried greater weight. A reconnaissance of the Chindwin area also showed that the river was easily passable by rafts during the dry season. Nevertheless, the *Headquarters Burma Area Army* and even his own Chief of Staff, Major-General Obata, opposed the venture, and the latter had to be replaced by Major-General Kunomura in June 1943. However, the *Imperial Headquarters* at Tokyo was keen to produce a spectacular victory to offset the effects on civilian morale of the Japanese defeats in the Pacific. Moreover, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose strongly favoured attack by the Indian National Army (then about to be re-formed) and the Japanese army to liberate India. As a result of these cross-currents, several exploratory conferences were held in Rangoon in June, July and August 1943, on the various aspects of supply, reinforcements etc., necessary for the attack on Imphal, and in September 1943, orders were finally issued to the *Fifteenth Army* at Maymyo to prepare for the operation.<sup>6</sup> As an essential preliminary, the Chinese armies advancing from Yunnan were suddenly attacked by the whole of the *56th Division* and the main elements of the *18th Division* in October 1943 and were thrown back, thus removing any possible immediate threat from the rear to the Japanese troops assaulting Imphal. Moreover Haka, Falam and Fort White were captured by the Japanese in November-December 1943 in order to obtain a good spring-board for their attack.

So far, the Japanese High Command had not paid any particular attention to the two Chinese divisions creeping slowly forward through the Hukawng Valley. The Japanese had no high opinion of the fighting abilities of Chungking troops. They believed that the famous *18th Division*, which had been relieved of responsibility for the Homalin area by the *31st Division* in August 1943, was more than a match for the two Chinese divisions. About 30 November 1943, however, a small detachment of the *18th Division* was suddenly attacked by the Chinese troops on the banks of the Tanai river. When the *18th Division* staged a counter-attack, it received a rude shock. The Chinese troops stood firm, and the counter-attack was repulsed. The threat from the north could no longer be ignored. If the Chinese advance was to be stopped, the *18th Division* required urgently some mechanical transport to supply the main Japanese force in the northern Hukawng Valley, but that could not be supplied unless preparations for the Imphal attack were postponed.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



Thus the Japanese were once more faced with the crucial choice between a purely defensive and an offensive-defensive strategy. They could either devote their limited resources in plugging holes in the extensive fronts from week to week, switching their troops from this sector to that as each threat became dangerous. This defensive strategy might at best only postpone the Allied reconquest of Burma till the available Japanese troops had been decimated by attrition. The alternative was to seize the initiative by a bold stroke and hurl back the numerous Allied armies closing in on them by a threat to India. This strategy required the employment of merely holding forces against the Chinese in the north and the east, while the maximum strength would be used to break through on the Imphal front, seize that vital base and cut the line of communication of General Stilwell's forces. If this plan succeeded, it would compel General Stilwell to retreat hastily, stop the all-important air ferry to China and leave India open to invasion. The whole strategic picture would be changed in one stroke. The Allied threat to Burma would be removed for many a long month, and the world would be stupefied by another dazzling Japanese victory. Of course, they realised that failure would be disastrous. But, nurtured as they were on Clausewitz's ideal of the "Feldherr", and the "Radical Solution" to all war problems, they still chose the heavier gamble. The fact that they came within an inch of success must be considered ample vindication of their German strategic doctrines.

In the midst of these Japanese cogitations and calculations came the violent battles of the Mayu range area in Arakan. These battles seemed to the Japanese High Command to fit in with its major plan for the offensive against Manipur, for they could reasonably be expected to draw away Allied reserves to Arakan and keep them pinned there. In the absence of these Allied reserves, the Japanese attack against Imphal would have greater chances of success. The same considerations were applicable to the long range penetration of Wingate's forces behind the Japanese lines—"Operation Thursday", already mentioned. When the Japanese first learned of the airborne troops of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade landing near Rail Indaw early in March, they underestimated the strength of the troops involved and considered that no major threat would develop in that quarter. At the same time, they were justified in considering "Operation Thursday" as a further depletion of Allied reserves that might be used to stem the coming Japanese offensive, and, therefore, a welcome Allied mistake. Consequently, the Japanese decided to go ahead with their offensive against Imphal, and considered that the Arakan battles and "Operation Thursday" had further improved their chances of success in it. What they overlooked was the startling efficiency of the Allied air forces in supplying from the air the



be sieged troops of the 7th Indian Infantry Division and the advancing columns of Wingate's jungle commandos. Before their eyes were two brilliant demonstrations of the new technique of large-scale air-supply that enabled surrounded or isolated bodies of troops to fight on. Yet they went ahead with their offensive, the whole strategy of which was based on cutting the lines of communication of large bodies of troops in the hope that thereby they would be compelled to retreat, as laid down in the books. This failure to appreciate the potentialities of modern air power and to understand the lessons of recent operations must be considered primarily responsible for the failure of the great Japanese offensive against Imphal.

Orders to begin the Imphal operation were issued by the *Imperial Headquarters* about 10 January 1944. About 10 February, these percolated down to the *Fifteenth Army* which issued the following instructions<sup>a</sup> :—

- “(i) The offensive will start in Blitzkrieg style early in March.
- (ii) First, *33rd Division* will carry out a surprise attack against the British-Indian 17th Division in the Tiddim-Tonzang Area. A part of the Division, *Yamamoto Force*, will assume the offensive in the Moreh area and so attract the attention of the British-Indian Army to this area, and at the same time deceive them into the belief that this was merely a local offensive.
- (iii) Then, seizing a favourable opportunity, *31st* and *15th Divisions* will cross the Chindwin from Homalin—Paungbyin Front, and *31st Division* will attack and occupy Kohima with its main force to hinder the reinforcement of the British-Indian Army. *15th Division* will make an attack with its main force along the front north-west of Imphal ; part of the division will attack the Imphal—Kohima road near the Mission. *33rd Division*, with its main force, will launch an offensive against Bishenpur, and, with *Yamamoto Force*, in the Pael area.
- (iv) The Imphal operations will be completed in about one month and then the Kohima Front will be reinforced with a part of the Force employed in Imphal ; *Fifteenth Army* will then go over to the defensive.”

The strategic deployment for these operations was also laid down. The *31st Division* was to deploy in the Pinlebu, Tamanthi and Homalin areas, the *15th Division* in Wuntho and Paungbyin areas and the *33rd Division* in Mawlaik, Kalewa and Fort White areas. To conceal their intention, only the minimum strength was to be kept in the front line. River-crossing preparations were to be

<sup>a</sup> Bulletin No. 240 of Seatic, op. cit.



kept strictly secret and attempts were to be made to deceive the Allies into the belief that the Japanese army was constructing strong defensive positions along the river Chindwin.

To leave the *Fifteenth Army* free to devote all its attention to the Imphal operations, the *56th Division* in the Yunnan area was placed directly under the command of the *Burma Area Army*. Lieut-General Mutaguchi felt greatly elated at these developments and decided to extend operations deeper into India. "This was one of the reasons which caused him to assign too much strength to the Kohima Area." The Japanese High Command appreciated the desirability of launching the offensive well ahead of the monsoon, but the delay in the arrival of the *15th Division* from Siam forced them to postpone it till early March. Even as it was, two infantry battalions and the Army Service Corps had still not reached the front in the middle of March.

#### ALLIED APPRECIATION AND PLANS

The South-East Asia Command did not long remain unaware of these Japanese intentions. Evidences of an impending Japanese offensive were unmistakable. In July 1943, there were only four Japanese divisions in Burma, viz., the *55th Division* in Arakan, the *33rd Division* in Kabaw Valley and lower Chindwin, the *18th Division* in upper Chindwin and Hukawng Valley, and the *56th Division* on the Yunnan front. By November 1943, the *31st Division* and also the *34th Independent Mixed Brigade* had arrived in Burma, bringing the number of Japanese troops in the country to a total of 135,000 men.<sup>9</sup> The *54th Division* from Java arrived in February 1944, and the *15th Division* and the *2nd Division* soon followed. At the same time, a second Army Headquarters named the *Twenty-eighth Army* was created to control the forces in southern Burma. As a result of these reinforcements, the Japanese forces in Burma in March 1944 amounted to eight divisions and one independent brigade, comprising seventy-six infantry battalions and totalling some 200,000 men.

There were other indications of an offensive too. About the end of January, air reconnaissance showed considerable troop movements on the east bank of the Chindwin. Roads were being improved up to Homalin, and rafts were being collected on the Uyu river. About the same time, definite identifications were obtained of the *15th Division* on the front.

Further evidences accumulated in February leading the Allied commanders to suspect strongly that something unusual was afoot.

<sup>9</sup> The Siege and Relief of Kohima, File No. 11085, and Mountbatten's Report, p. 40.



They were inclined to be "jumpy" particularly in view of the fact that the entire line of communication from Dimapur to Imphal and thence to Tiddim—a distance of about 300 miles—ran parallel to the front. It thus greatly facilitated the typical Japanese manoeuvre of infiltrating through the front and sitting down on the enemy's lines of communication.

In view of this situation, General Officer Commanding the IV Corps, General Scoones, prepared an appreciation on 3 February 1944, and outlined a plan of action.<sup>10</sup> He argued that since the Japanese *33rd Division* was spread out from Tiddim to the Kabaw Valley and was engaging two Indian divisions, namely, the 17th Indian Division and the 20th Indian Division, it probably had only a holding role. But the *15th Division* and *31st Division* were not fully engaged by the Allied troops, and so a maximum of four regiments out of these were free to stage an offensive. The unusual Japanese activity in the Homalin area also indicated that the attack would be launched in that sector. From the Homalin area the Japanese commander could throw a maximum of four battalions westwards along three tracks against the line of communication from Kohima to Imphal. Screened by these troops, one Japanese division could cross the Chindwin, capture Thanan and then wheel south to advance down the upper Kabaw Valley and capture Tamu. To counter these anticipated moves, it was planned to disengage the 20th Indian Division from the Kyaukchaw-Minthami area and concentrate it around Tamu. Information of any Japanese advance towards Ukhrul or Kohima might be expected within 24 hours from "V" force units equipped with wireless transmitters. The 49th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division stationed near Ukhrul, the detachment of Kalibahadur Regiment (Nepalese) and the "V" Force were available to hold a Japanese advance towards Kohima-Imphal road, and they would be reinforced by another brigade from the 23rd Indian Division, if necessary. The Corps Reserve, consisting of the remainder of the 23rd Indian Division and 254th Indian Tank Brigade would be moved to the help of the 20th Indian Division in the Tamu area, and the Japanese attack would be beaten back with the help of concentrated air-strikes.

Within a month, however, these confident plans were changed. In his appreciation, dated 29 February 1944, General Scoones realised that, though the IV Corps had as many ground troops as the Japanese and enjoyed air superiority, the Japanese communications were shorter and they had better mobility.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the

<sup>10</sup> Appreciation of the situation north of the line Palel—Tamu—Sittaung, by GOC IV Corps on 3 February 1944, File No. 7765.

<sup>11</sup> Appreciation of the situation by GOC IV Corps on 29 February 1944 "in the event of a major enemy attack materialising in the next two months," File No. 8537.



Allied troops in the Chin hills had to rely on 300 miles of road, of which about 167 miles were unmetalled. The 20th Indian Division in the Tamu area was maintained by 213 miles of road. The Japanese communications were appreciably shorter. Ye-U to Kaing was 112 miles; Rail Indaw to Nawngpu-Awng via Pinbon and Sitsawk was 11 miles; and Wuntho to Paungbyin was only 109 miles. Moreover, a Japanese division required a smaller tonnage, or "lift", for maintenance than an Indian division, so it could be supplied and moved over roads which would be quite inadequate for the latter. The existing dispositions of the IV Corps units were widely dispersed, and to get from the 17th Indian Division to the 20th Indian Division by mechanical transport, one had to travel 250 miles. These dispositions were in fact the result of out of date plans for a limited offensive in the area against only two Japanese divisions, and to facilitate the construction of roads, brigades etc. in the forward areas with a view to an advance later on. Since the Japanese had now three divisions available, the old plans were obsolete and the considerable numbers of pioneers, engineers etc. near the front lines were an impediment. The dispersed positions, moreover, were dangerous. If the Japanese started by cutting the line of communication of the 17th Indian Division at the Manipur river-crossing and at milestone 109 by infiltrating from Paidain and Yazagyo in the Kabaw Valley, then moved one regiment against Ukhrul and the Kohima—Imphal road, and finally advanced on Thanan and southwards to Tamu, the Allied troops would be in danger of being defeated in detail. The Corps reserve would be occupied in countering the threat to the Kohima—Imphal road and would be unable to go to the rescue of either the 17th Indian Division or the 20th Indian Division. If these two were defeated, the Corps reserve would not be able to defend Imphal against the converging Japanese attacks and all would be lost. The 17th Indian Division, therefore, must be withdrawn promptly on the opening of the Japanese offensive. The 20th Indian Division also should withdraw, because its line of communication would be easily cut at Shenam or Palel, if it tried to stand and defend Tamu.

This appreciation and plan were approved by General Slim, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Fourteenth Army, who only stipulated that, instead of wholesale withdrawal, the 20th Indian Division should organise a number of "brigade boxes" on the road from Moreh to Shenam, and thus delay and contest the Japanese advance.<sup>12</sup> By 4 March, General Slim had telegraphed his approval to General Scoones for stopping all construction work east of Moreh

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Letter dated 2 March 1944 from IV Corps to Fourteenth Army, and telegram dated 4 March from Fourteenth Army to IV Corps.



and for withdrawing the 17th and 20th Indian Divisions as necessary.

According to the plan, the intention was that the Allied troops should withdraw from forward areas as soon as a major threat developed and should hold the Imphal plain. In order to achieve this object the 17th Indian Division was to break contact when ordered and to move back to Imphal as rapidly as possible. The division was not to hold the Manipur river crossing or areas about milestone 109 and milestone 82 on the Imphal—Tiddim road, as this would lengthen the lines of communication and would mean having detachments in areas which might not be supported. A clear break-away was therefore to be aimed at and the 17th Indian Division (less one infantry brigade) was to move into reserve in the Imphal area. One infantry brigade was to be left in an area to be selected and prepared between milestones 40 and 50 on the Imphal—Tiddim road. The bridge across the Manipur river was to be demolished after the withdrawal and certain other demolitions were also to be carried out between Manipur River and milestone 109.

The 20th Indian Division, which was in the Kabaw Valley, was to continue its offensive-defensive role but was not to commit itself further down south. If a major threat developed, the 20th Indian Division was, on orders from the IV Corps, to concentrate in Moreh area and hold it to enable all "soft" units in the rear line of communication between Moreh and Shenam to withdraw. It should then withdraw under pressure to Shenam where it should hold any attempted Japanese advance northwards. Maintenance of the 20th Indian Division after reaching Shenam was to be from Palel.

The 23rd Indian Division, with the 50th Parachute Brigade and 254th Indian Tank Brigade under command, but less one infantry brigade in the Ukhrul area, was to remain in Corps reserve and be responsible for:—

- "(i) securing the line of communication between Kohima and Imphal from attacks from the east,
- (ii) ensuring that the Imphal Plain was kept clear of enemy parties."

All the units in the Imphal Plain were to be organised into a series of defensive "boxes". These "boxes" were to be sited so as to cover airfields as far as possible and be themselves self-contained in every respect for a period of 10 days.

The most easterly limit of major engineer work was to be Moreh. Engineer troops and equipment working east of Moreh were to be withdrawn immediately and their efforts concentrated on completing work west of Moreh as fast as possible. The only exception was to be the work on the road Tamu—Sittaung which was to be



continued under the IV Corps arrangements. The road was to be completed to Pyinbon Sakan in the first instance and then to Sittaung.

A few days later, the intended withdrawal in the Tamu and Tiddim sectors was formally approved by General Giffard, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, 11th Army Group. On 7 March 1944, General Giffard sent instructions to General Slim emphasising the following points:<sup>13</sup>—

- (a) The impending Japanese Offensive would probably be on a larger scale than anything they yet attempted in Burma.
- (b) The Allied lines of communication were parallel to the front and were a source of fundamental weakness.
- (c) The Imphal plain was of immense strategic importance and its loss would be disastrous. Its security, therefore, was the primary task of the IV Corps.
- (d) Confirming approval of the plan to withdraw, if necessary, from Tiddim and Tamu.
- (e) Reinforcements for the IV Corps must be found from within the troops allotted to the Fourteenth Army.

Thus, it is clear that the Allied commanders were alive to the danger of Japanese offensive. They had not given up hope that, if the Japanese offensive was not launched early in March, it might be cancelled due to the unexpected attack of Wingate's airborne 3rd Indian Division scheduled for 5 March 1944. But they had made careful plans for meeting it. Though, in the event, the threat to Kohima was found to have been underestimated, and General Slim later said that he himself should have ordered the 17th Indian Division to retreat from Tiddim before the Japanese could cut its line of communication,<sup>14</sup> these plans and preparations on the whole proved adequate and a disastrous defeat was inflicted on the Japanese in Burma from which they could never fully recover.

#### TROOP DISPOSITIONS—ALLIED AND JAPANESE

On the eve of the Japanese offensive, the Allied troops on the IV Corps front were disposed as follows:<sup>15</sup>—

Headquarters IV Corps and the bulk	
of Corps troops	... Imphal.
254th Indian Tank Brigade	... Milestone 109, Dima- pur-Imphal road.

<sup>13</sup> Giffard's *Despatch*, 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Slim: *Defeat into Victory*, p. 294.

<sup>15</sup> Location Statement No. 4 for IV Corps valid till 1800 hours on 10 March 1944, War Diary of IV Corps G Branch for March; and War Diaries for March 1944 of 254th Indian Tank Brigade and 50th Parachute Brigade.



Two Companies "Kalibahadur Regiment"	...	Imphal.
Headquarters 17th Indian Division	...	Tiddim.
Headquarters 48th Indian Infantry Brigade	...	Vital Corner-Kennedy Peak.
Headquarters 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade	...	Tiddim.
Headquarters 20th Indian Division	...	Tamu.
Headquarters 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade	...	Hlezeik (RP 8177) on Tamu-Kyaukchaw road.
Headquarters 80th Indian Infantry Brigade	...	Milestone 16, Tamu-Sittaung road (RP 9591).
Headquarters 100th Indian Infantry Brigade	...	Nanmunta Chaung (RP 7575).
Headquarters 23rd Indian Division	...	Milestone 6, Imphal-Palel road.
Headquarters 1st Indian Infantry Brigade	...	Kuntaung (RK 8205).
Headquarters 37th Indian Infantry Brigade	...	Milestone 109, Dimapur-Imphal road (RK 3598).
Headquarters 49th Indian Infantry Brigade	...	Milestone 36, Imphal-Ukhrul road.
Headquarters 50th Parachute Brigade	...	Milestone 10, Kohima-Jessami road.

The airforce allotted for support to the IV Corps was distributed as follows:<sup>16</sup>—

221st Group R.A.F.	...	...	Imphal
168th Wing	...	...	Khumbhirgram airfield
45th Squadron	...	...	-do-
110th Squadron	...	...	-do-
123rd Squadron	...	...	Pathirkandi airfield
170th Squadron	...	...	Imphal
5th Squadron	...	...	Sapam

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



34th Squadron	...	...	Palel
133rd Squadron	....	...	Dimapur
81st Squadron	...	...	Tulihal airfield
189th Wing	...	...	Palel airfield
42nd Squadron	...	...	-do-
28th Squadron	...	...	Imphal airfield

These airforce units included two Fighter Reconnaissance Squadrons, two Fighter Squadrons armed with cannon, one Hurricane Bomber Squadron, one Spitfire Squadron, and one Dive-Bomber Squadron.<sup>17</sup> In case of an emergency, moreover, the IV Corps could obtain massive support and reinforcements from the Allied air forces engaged in strategic bombing, the air ferry to China and air support to the Arakan front.

The Japanese forces for the offensive, as mentioned earlier, comprised the *15th Division*, *31st Division* and *33rd Division*. The principal formations in each division were as follows:—

#### *15th Division*

- 51st Infantry Regiment
- 60th Infantry Regiment
- 67th Infantry Regiment
- 21st Field Artillery Regiment
- 15th Engineer Regiment

#### *31st Division*

- 58th Infantry Regiment
- 124th Infantry Regiment
- 138th Infantry Regiment
- 31st Divisional Mountain Artillery Regiment
- 31st Divisional Engineer Regiment

#### *33rd Division*

- 213th Infantry Regiment
- 214th Infantry Regiment
- 215th Infantry Regiment
- 33rd Divisional Mountain Artillery Regiment
- 33rd Divisional Engineer Regiment

In addition, there were in support, units of the Indian National Army and the Burma National Army. In the beginning, the forces of the Indian National Army comprised only No. 1 Subhas Brigade under Major-General Shah Nawaz Khan, but towards the end of the campaign an entire division of the Indian National Army had reached the front.<sup>18</sup> Of these Japanese forces, the *33rd*

<sup>17</sup> Appreciation by GOC IV Corps dated 29 February 1944.

<sup>18</sup> Shah Nawaz Khan: *I.N.A. and its Netaji*.



*Division* was stationed in the Tiddim area and in the Kabaw Valley, where these units were called the *Yamamoto Group*. The *15th Division* deployed the bulk of its strength north of the Imphal—Tamu road, while the *31st Division* operated further north against Jessami and Kohima. Unlike the IV Corps, the Japanese had no permanent allotment of air support. Japanese air squadrons were only temporarily attached to the armies or divisions for particular operations.

#### THE JAPANESE THRUST FROM THE SOUTH<sup>19</sup>

On the night of 7/8 March 1944, a report was received at the headquarters of the 17th Indian Division that a party of Japanese troops numbering fifty had crossed over to the west bank of the Manipur river near Vazang. The next morning, the headquarters of the IV Corps at Imphal was informed of this fact, though it was by no means clear that the long awaited Japanese offensive had started. One Company of Japanese troops was also reported at Pangsak on 9 March and a detachment of local irregulars at Saihmun was forced to withdraw when attacked by a mixed force of about 80 Japanese and Chins. The next day, the Japanese column had reached Kaptel. On 11 March it reached Mualnuam early in the morning. The local villagers reported the strength of this force as about 1,000 men, but this estimate was considered to be exaggerated. By the morning of 12 March the appreciation of the Allied commanders was that about one Japanese battalion with four guns was operating west of the Manipur river, though it could not be guessed whether the Japanese had moved north or east from Mualnuam.

Meanwhile the eastern Japanese column starting from the Yazagyo area had attacked Suanglangsu Vum early in the morning of 9 March, but had to withdraw soon after at daylight on encountering stiff opposition. That day and the next this position continued to be shelled with guns and mortars and was finally captured by the Japanese on the morning of 11 March. The next morning (12 March) about one company of Japanese troops was reported to have reached one mile east of Phaitu. On 13 March, the Allied positions at Phaitu and Richmond Park were attacked incessantly. Two Japanese attacks were repulsed by the garrison, but before evening the position at Richmond Park had fallen to the Japanese, who pushed on and debouched on the road at Tuitum (RP 1217) on 14 March and cut the telephone communications

<sup>19</sup> IV Corps Operations 8 March to 31 July 1944; War Diary of 17th Indian Division; War Diary of 63rd Infantry Brigade, and War Diary of 48th Infantry Brigade.



between the headquarters of IV Corps and the headquarters of 17th Indian Division at Tiddim.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile Indian patrols had been sent west across the Manipur river from Tonzang. They were equipped with wireless sets to report immediately on the movement of the western Japanese column but were unable to find it. On the other hand, some patrols from Tuibel were in contact with the Japanese forces on 12 and 13 March. Moreover, from the information received about the same time from the local inhabitants and the personnel of a Wireless Observer Post at Mualnuam it was found that the Japanese column west of the river had a strength of about two battalions and that it was advancing on Tungzang and Tuipi. Aircraft were sent almost daily for reconnaissance but they failed to detect the movements of the hostile column or the direction of its advance owing to the density of the jungle and the practice of the Japanese to advance only during the hours of darkness.

The Allied commanders were unable to discern whether the Japanese on the west bank of the river would drive due north to cut the Imphal-Tiddim road at milestone 109 or would turn east to cross the river and link up with the forces attacking Tonzang from the east. On 13 March an Indian patrol captured a Chin villager who had acted as a coolie for the Japanese column from Kaptel to Mualnuam. The prisoner stated that the Japanese party was 1,000 strong and had left Mualnuam for Dampi on 12 March and was bound for Singgel. This information was verified later on the same day when a report was received from the Administrative Commandant at milestone 109, saying that according to the local villagers the Japanese had reached Khuabem very near to the milestone 109 position. By the evening that day, it had become clear from this piecemeal information that two Japanese columns, each with a strength of one thousand men, had passed through Mualnuam, one on the night of 11/12 March and the other on the night of 12/13 March, and were advancing north to cut the Tiddim road in the area of milestones 100-109.

On the morning of 14 March 1944, as the eastern Japanese column reached the Tiddim road at Tuitum, the western column arrived at the road between the milestones 100 and 109. The Tiddim road was then cut at both these places and the western Japanese column started its attack against the position at milestone 109. The Allied troops on the Tiddim road up to the bridge over the Manipur river at milestone 127 were under the command of the 17th Indian Division. North of this point the numerous administrative and road building units were collected in the big administra-

<sup>20</sup> Operations, IV Corps, *op. cit.*



tive area at milestone 109, which was the main Depot on the Tiddim line of communication. As the Japanese threat developed, these administrative troops collected at milestone 109, and moved back in batches towards Imphal. More administrative troops, however, kept arriving at milestone 109 from the south, and on 14 March there were over 4,000 non-combatants in the Depot Area, but the only troops of real fighting value were one Field Company and a few dozen infantry troops and gunners on their way to or from Tiddim.<sup>21</sup> During the night of 13/14 March 1944, the 9th Jat (Medium Machine-Gun) Battalion joined the garrison at milestone 109, except for one company which was left holding the high ground at Singgel near milestone 100. Owing to the need for level ground and ample water supply the depots at milestone 109 were situated in the valley on the banks of the Kaphi Lui stream and were dominated from all sides by the rising hills. On 14 March, the Japanese positioned themselves on a spur north-west of the Camp and cut the road to Imphal. The few fighting troops available proved unable to reopen the road and the situation rapidly deteriorated. Accordingly, on the night of 16/17 March, most of the non-combatants in the area were successfully evacuated to milestone 82 and the milestone 109 position was finally abandoned on 18 March. The Japanese quickly dug themselves in in the surrounding hills and prepared to block the way for the 17th Indian Division trying to retreat northwards to Imphal.

The details of the Japanese plan may be described here though the information was received piecemeal and over a period of several weeks.<sup>22</sup> The force left in the Fort White area was known as the *Yajiri Force* and consisted of the following units:—

*11th Company, 3rd Battalion, 215th Regiment ;*

*One Section, 214th Regiment ;*

*Detachment of the 5th Light Tank from 14th Tank Regiment ;*

*Anti-Aircraft Detachment of two guns of 33rd Mountain Artillery Regiment ;*

*33rd Engineer Regiment, less 1st and 2nd Companies ;*

*4th Bridging Section.*

The *Yajiri Force*, composed largely of engineer and artillery units, had the task of repairing the road Fort White—Tiddim—Milestone 109—Imphal as soon as possible to facilitate swift pursuit when the 17th Indian Division retreated. As will be described later, its artillery supported the attacks at Tuitum against the rear-guards of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade on 24/25 March, but its

<sup>21</sup> Operations, IV Corps, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> War Diary of IV Corps, G Branch for April 1944 ; "Appendix A to IV Corps Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 96 dated 7 April 44.



tanks were destroyed there in a minefield before they could achieve any success.

The *Yajiri Force* was supported by the *Kurogane Force* composed of *2nd Battery 3rd Medium Artillery Regiment*, *18th Medium Artillery Regiment* less *2nd Battery* and three anti-aircraft guns with orders to harass the garrison at Kennedy Peak by artillery bombardment and prevent its retreat.

The force that had crossed the Manipur river south of Mualbem on 8-10 March and had advanced north to attack milestone 109 consisted of *1st Battalion 215th Regiment*, *3rd Battalion 215th Regiment* less *11th Company* and *8th Company 2nd Battalion 215th Regiment*, with a detachment of mountain artillery. Its role was to annihilate the remnants of the 17th Indian Division if they escaped from the Tuitum road-block and to prevent reinforcements from Imphal from reaching the trapped division. The Tuitum—Tonzang road-block was to be manned by a force including *1st Battalion 214th Regiment*, *2nd Battalion 214th Regiment* less *5th Company*, *9th and 40th Companies of 3rd Battalion 214th Regiment* and a detachment of mountain artillery. These troops were to advance in two columns and occupy the Tonzang-Tuitum area by 14 March 1944, thus blocking the escape route of the 17th Indian Division from Tiddim.

As reserves for these forces, only the *3rd Battalion 214th Regiment* less *9th and 10th Companies*, was available in the Myittha valley near Gangaw, due south of Kalemryo. Headquarters, *33rd Mountain Artillery Regiment* was also situated near Gangaw, while the remaining units of the *33rd Division* were formed into the *Yamamoto Force* for the Tamu Sector.

The 17th Indian Division started its withdrawal from the Tiddim area during the second week of March. By 10 March, 7th Baluch Regiment had concentrated at Tonzang. The same day 9 Border less two companies of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade moved to Saizang and came under the command of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade. The next day Headquarters 48th Indian Infantry Brigade moved back from Kennedy Peak to milestone 12 on the Tiddim-Kalemryo road. Between 12 and 14 March,  $\frac{1}{3}$  Gurkha Rifles, Headquarters 29th Mountain Regiment and Headquarters 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade also moved to Tonzang as the Japanese threat became obvious. At 2040 hours on 13 March, Lieut-General Sir G. Scoones, General Officer Commanding IV Corps, ordered the 17th Indian Division to begin withdrawal. At 0800 hours next morning, order for withdrawal was issued by the 17th Indian Division to all its units. By the morning of 15 March, Tiddim had been evacuated and the divisional headquarters was established in the area of milestones 142-144. The 63rd



Indian Infantry Brigade was in the north acting as the advance guard while the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade in the south brought up the rear. The Divisional Engineers blew up the road south of Tiddim in five different places and also planted four hundred booby-traps and delayed-action bombs to delay the Japanese pursuers.

On 15 March, troops of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade mounted an attack on the Tiddim road-block, but failed to capture it. The next morning the attack was renewed with the support of heavy aerial bombardment and intense shelling by massed guns, and subsequently the position was stormed by 1/3 Gurkha Rifles which took it by assault, inflicting heavy casualties on the defenders. The road was thereafter cleared up to the Manipur river bridge at milestone 126. At 0600 hours on 17 March, the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade marched out from its positions at milestone 144, near Tonzang. It was led by 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, the Brigade Headquarters came next, then followed the 21st Mountain Regiment, 9 Border, 17th Indian Divisional Headquarters, 17th Indian Divisional Troops, and finally 1/7 Gurkha Rifles bringing up the rear. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade reached Tuitum at 1100 hours and pushed on to the northern side of the bridge, reaching milestone 125 at 1630 hours the same day. Light vehicles of the 17th Indian Division crossed the bridge soon after while heavy vehicles of the divisional headquarters reached there early on the morning of 18 March. On 18 March, the Headquarters 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade also reached milestone 126 but a strong rearguard was left behind to prevent the Japanese from advancing north of Tonzang. This rearguard was attacked on the night of 21/22 March by one company of Japanese troops who succeeded in capturing the east knoll of Tuitum Saddle.<sup>23</sup> By 1400 hours of 22 March, however, the Japanese had been driven back from the position by an attack launched by 1/10 Gurkha Rifles. The Japanese attack was renewed in the night of 22/23 March but was repulsed. During the night of 24/25 the Japanese launched three desperate attacks, one of which was supported by light tanks. All these attacks were repulsed and the Japanese lost four of their tanks in a minefield. On 26 March, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to withdraw towards milestone 109 which had by now been recaptured. Accordingly it withdrew from Tuitum area and blew up the bridge over the Manipur river behind it.

On reaching the north bank of the river in the evening of 17 March, the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade immediately took in hand preparations for recapturing the milestone 109 position. The

<sup>23</sup> War Diaries for March 1944 of 17th Indian Division and 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade.



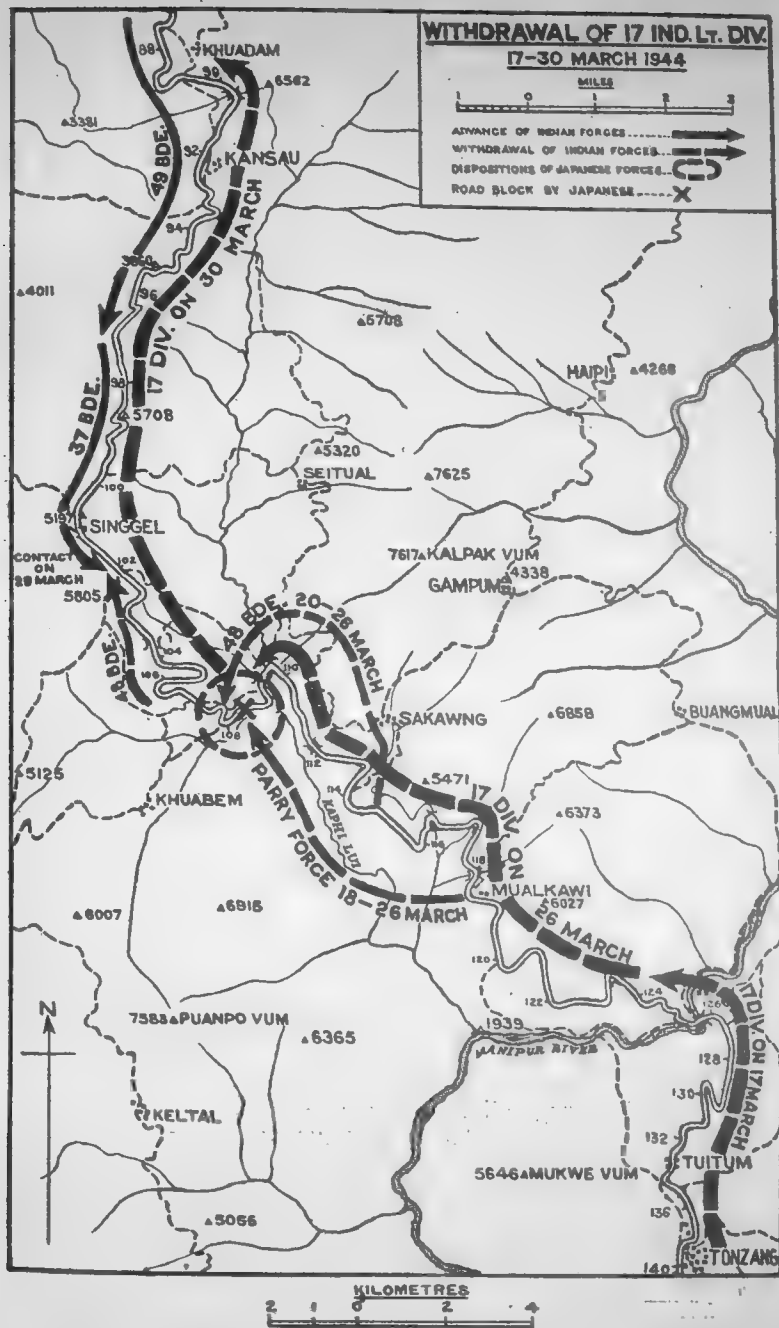
Japanese were firmly entrenched in the hills surrounding the area and commanded the road. It was decided, therefore, to send Commando Platoon of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles and 2nd South African Group of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade to clear the Japanese from the ridges south of the milestone 109 position. On 18 March, this column, known as the Parry Force,<sup>24</sup> moved up to Mualkawi near milestone 119, crossed the Kaphi Lui stream and climbed up to the spur west of it at RP 005255. It then started moving north towards milestone 108, mopping up the Japanese positions as it went. On the same day a screen of fighting patrols consisting of Commando Platoons of 1/7 Gurkha Rifles and 9 Border was thrown off to the north to operate in the area of Kalpak Vum. At 0900 hours on 19 March, one Company of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles and two sections of Armoured Carriers advanced on Mualkawi, followed at 1130 hours by the rest of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles with one troop 37th Mortar Battery and two anti-tank guns. They were ordered to march up to milestone 117 and thence to patrol to Point 5471 and down the spur, from there to milestone 114 and to occupy the area, if possible. At the same time a platoon of West Yorks was ordered to proceed to Buangmual to reconnoitre the area and patrol up to Gampum. In the afternoon of 19 March, the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade headquarters arrived at Mualkawi where it received word from 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles that they had occupied Point 6373, Point 5471 and the spur running west to milestone 114. That night this headquarters remained at Mualkawi defended by 1/7 Gurkha Rifles. Of the other troops in the brigade, 4th Frontier Force Rifles was busy neutralising the Japanese position on Point 6027 and 9 Border was in the area of milestone 123. The next morning 9 Border moved up to milestone 123. 1/7 Gurkha Rifles advanced in three columns for an attack on milestone 110.<sup>25</sup> Two of these columns with a strength of eight platoons moved along the hill-side on the right hand side of the road, and the third proceeded along the road. By that evening the third column had reached milestone 112 beyond which it encountered stiff opposition and was unable to proceed further. The first two columns by that time had reached near Sakawng village but were finding further progress difficult.

The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade then received orders to launch itself in a right hook through the hills north of the road at milestone 109 area. Its route of advance was laid down as milestone 114, Sakawng village, along top of the ridge, and down to milestone 110; and the advance was to be carried out on an all-pack basis. Accordingly on 21 March, 1/7 Gurkha Rifles concentrated above

<sup>24</sup> It was so known by the fact of its being commanded by Major Parry of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles.

<sup>25</sup> War Diary 48th Indian Infantry Brigade.







Sakawng village, 2/5 RGR was ordered to proceed there from milestone 116 and the rest of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade moved to RP 042280 near milestone 113, and camped there for the night. At 0730 hours on 22 March, the brigade, headed by 9 Border, climbed up to the high ground above Sakawng village. They found there 1/7 Gurkha Rifles held up by two strong Japanese positions at RP 032300 and RP 037299. 1/7 Gurkha Rifles continued to attack 032300 position, but at 1030 hours 9 Border put in an attack by two companies on the other position at 037299. This attack however failed, as also another attack by 9 Border against the same position at 1410 hours causing heavy casualties to 9 Border which lost 9 killed and 57 wounded. Early the next morning, 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, which had by then joined the rest of the brigade, attacked 037299 position and occupied it by 1100 hours. 1/7 Gurkha Rifles was still held up by the position at 032300, but the way was clear and 9 Border went forward to secure the spur to the west of milestone 109. By 1700 hours that day (23 March), 1/7 Gurkha Rifles had liquidated the 032300 position and 9 Border had occupied RP 024300 without encountering opposition.<sup>26</sup> The next morning 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles wheeled round to the south and moved towards milestone 108. One of its patrols reached milestone 106 but had to withdraw from West Knoll (RO 9929) which was found held by the Japanese troops. Early on the morning of 25 March, 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles advanced and captured West Knoll without difficulty. It then turned south-east trying to reach the ridge near milestone 108. Messages were sent at 1020 hours and 1220 hours to the Parry Force operating south of the road to move down and contact 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles on the road near milestone 108. At 1415 hours, 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles attacked a Japanese position on the south ridge (RP 0009) but was repulsed with heavy casualties due to intense fire from light and medium machine-guns. At 1720 hours, the attack was repeated but failed again. Early the next morning, however, a patrol of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles found that Japanese defenders had evacuated the south ridge. The battalion moved forward again reaching the road and established contact with the Parry Force before the morning was out. At 1100 hours, on 26 March, the whole of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade marched down from Sakawng hill to milestone 109. The most dangerous Japanese road-block on the Imphal—Tiddim road was thereby broken through.

The Parry Force sent to operate south of the milestone 109 position had reached RP 001293 by 25 March but was held up there by a platoon of Japanese troops securely dug in. It attacked the

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



position at 1700 hours on 26 March, but, being unable to advance nearer than 20 yards from the Japanese perimeter wire, it dug itself in. The Japanese escaped from the position during the night, and, on the morning of 26 March, the Parry Force moved down and made contact with 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles near milestone 108, as already described.

After the capture of milestone 109 area on 26 March, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade moved up from the Manipur river bridge and on the 27th took over the defence of the hills around milestone 109 from the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>27</sup> Some parties of Japanese troops were still operating on the road between milestone 105 and milestone 98, hence the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade had to open an attack against them. After several days of steady advance and confused fighting, patrols of 7/10 Baluch made contact with the patrols of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division along the road in the area of milestone 102, and on 28 March the 37th and 49th Indian Infantry Brigades came under the command of the 17th Indian Division. By the early morning of 29 March the road had been cleared of the Japanese troops and during the day the headquarters of the 17th Indian Division and of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade and all their troops reached milestone 82. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade acted as the rear-guard for the divisional troops, and reached milestone 82 in the early hours of 30 March. Those with animal transport proceeded via Seitual and reached the camp at milestone 82 in the morning of 30 March. The 37th Indian Infantry Brigade was left holding the gate behind the 17th Indian Division troops in the area of milestone 93.

The 37th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division had been sent up to help the 17th Indian Division in clearing the Japanese road-blocks. In the beginning of March, the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade was stationed at milestone 110 on the Dimapur—Imphal road.<sup>28</sup> It received orders there at 2205 hours on 13 March and arrived in the area of milestone 82 on the Imphal—Tiddim road during the night of 14/15 March. It had under command one squadron of 7th Cavalry and 5/6 Rajputana Rifles. On the morning of 15 March, 3/5 Gurkha Rifles less one company supported by one Troop 7th Cavalry was ordered to proceed from milestone 82 to milestone 100 where one company of Jat (Machine-gun) Battalion was being attacked by the Japanese. Resistance was encountered when reaching near milestone 100 and two attacks were launched by 3/5 Gurkha Rifles. By 1830 hours on 15 March, the Jat (Machine-gun) Battalion was

<sup>27</sup> War Diary, 17th Indian Division for March 1944.

<sup>28</sup> War Diary of 37th Indian Infantry Brigade.



reinforced and the position was improved. Two tanks were brought up the road but both of them were destroyed in the course of fighting.

The next day, 16 March, was comparatively quiet at milestone 100 but information was received that the Japanese had entrenched themselves in the rear of the position near milestone 98. On 17 March, therefore, another attack was put in at milestone 100 causing some Japanese casualties. But the Indian troops in the position were getting exhausted and were running out of ammunition, food and water. There were 40 casualties also which needed urgent evacuation. It was decided, therefore, to abandon the position and at 0100 hours on 18 March the troops withdrew from milestone 100 back to milestone 82. In the action around milestone 100, 130 dead Japanese were counted while the Gurkha casualties amounted to 103, including 21 killed.<sup>29</sup>

Small parties of Japanese troops then infiltrated through the hills and established themselves at several points on the road in between the Allied positions. The 49th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division had also been sent forward on 16 March and was occupying the milestone 82 position with 6/5 Mahrattas and 5/6 Rajputana Rifles in support. About 20-21 March, fighting was going on over a long section of the road. The stretch from milestone 82 to 93 was clear of the Japanese and the headquarters of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade was situated at milestone 93. From there to milestone 98, the section of the road was not free from the danger of Japanese infiltrating parties. 3/5 Gurkha Rifles held milestone 98 position. From milestone 98 to milestone 100 the road was being fought for, while from milestone 100 to milestone 106 the Japanese controlled the road.

On 22 March, units of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade with headquarters at milestones 93 were in action in the area of milestones 98-100 when a new road-block was reported at milestone 96 behind them. Troops were sent forward from milestone 93 to clear the road but they met with strong opposition. On 23 March, the Japanese counter-attacked but were repulsed, suffering 50 casualties. Another Japanese party of two platoons tried to establish a new road-block at milestone 95.5 but was driven off. The Japanese tactics were based on infiltrating through the hills and blocking the road wherever they could find it comparatively undefended. They could not withstand the attacks launched with the help of tanks, but they always succeeded in creating other road-blocks as soon as they were cleared from one. Late at night on 24 March, news was received of a Japanese road-block as far back as milestone 72, but

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid* ; also File No. 2421.



the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade continued its efforts to reach the 17th Indian Division. Between 24 and 28 March, there was confused fighting round these various road-blocks between milestone 90 and milestone 100. But on 28 March, milestone 100 position was recaptured. The same day patrols of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade had succeeded in contacting troops of the 17th Indian Division as related earlier.<sup>30</sup>

The Japanese pressed on at their best pace on the heels of the 17th Indian Division, and by 30 March had succeeded even in building a bamboo bridge over the Manipur river capable of carrying light mechanical transport. On 1 April, the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to clear the road-block at milestone 72. The Japanese force entrenched there was identified as the *9th Company* of *3/213th Regiment* and elements of *6th Company 2/213th Regiment* with a high proportion of automatic weapons. 9 Border of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade secured Banglai and picketed the spurs leading down to the road. A Commando Group moved east through Aisih to Maltonjang to outflank the road-block. Eventually, after heavy fighting, the final Japanese road-block at milestone 72 was broken on 2 April. A motorised column then advanced, clearing the road to milestone 41. By 1730 hours that evening a convoy carrying 1,000 casualties from the 17th and 23rd Indian Divisions was passing milestone 37 towards Imphal, which it reached without incident. The stores convoy of about 300 vehicles stopped at milestone 37 during the night of 2/3 April and went forward at first light the next morning. 2/19 Hyderabad Regiment moved into position at milestone 33 to defend the divisional troops passing there. The Japanese made an unsuccessful attempt to outflank the Indian troops at milestone 91 and to attack the headquarters of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade at milestone 82 on 2 April, and shelled the area the following day. During the night of 2/3 April, the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade also drew back. By 5 April, the whole of the 17th Indian Division had passed north of milestone 41 near Churachandpur although patrols were still operating as far south as milestone 62. Facilitated by ferries carrying jeeps and lorries from milestone 41 to Imphal, the 48th and 63rd Indian Infantry Brigades had concentrated in the area of Sengmai by 5 April.<sup>31</sup> The 49th Indian Infantry Brigade joined 2/19 Hyderabad Regiment in defending the area between milestone 35 and milestone 30 of the Tiddim road.

The withdrawal of the 17th Indian Division from Tiddim to Imphal was now completed. It had covered 162 miles, of which about 100 miles had been disputed fanatically by the Japanese.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> File No. 2421.



But the numerous road-blocks had been broken through due to the great determination of the divisional troops and the help rendered by the 37th and 49th Indian Infantry Brigades. The Allied air force had also rendered excellent support. The supplies collected at milestone 127 (Manipur river bridge) were exhausted soon after the division had arrived there and thenceforward, until it reached milestone 82, it was maintained almost entirely by supply-dropping from the air. Troops of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade had also received valuable tactical support by almost daily airstrike against the Japanese entrenched in the milestone 100 area. The effect on the morale of troops can well be gauged from the comment of an officer of this brigade who, on learning of the new Japanese road-block behind him at milestone 72, said, "Information of this sort can be taken with comparative equanimity when air superiority is assured and the last few days have given us confidence in our air dropping."<sup>32</sup>

#### ALLIED WITHDRAWAL IN THE TAMU SECTOR

As already described earlier, the Tamu sector was held by the 20th Indian Division consisting of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, 80th Indian Infantry Brigade and 100th Indian Infantry Brigade. On 8 March 1944, the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was holding the area Kyaukchaw, the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade was spread out along the road Tamu—Sittaung with the 9th Battalion of FFR located to the north in the area Mintha, Myothit; and the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was operating along the road Tamu—Kalewa from Witok with 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles in the area Samdal—Holkolm. Moreover, the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division was at the time at Kuntaung staging a feint near Tonhe on the Chindwin to distract Japanese attention from the airborne attack by the 3rd Indian Division.

The Japanese plan for the Kabaw Valley was to pinch out the Tamu area by a double converging movement from the south and the north. The offensive up the Kabaw Valley from Yazagyo was carried out by the *Yamamoto Force* of the 33rd Division composed as follows<sup>33</sup>:—

*213th Regiment less 1 Battalion*

*5th Company and 7th Company 215th Regiment*

*14th Tank Regiment less ten tanks (which were in the Tiddim area)*

<sup>32</sup> War Diary of 37th Indian Infantry Brigade.

<sup>33</sup> War Diary of Headquarters IV Corps G Branch for April 1944, Appendix. A to IV Corps Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 96 dated 7 April 1944. Details of the Northern Japanese Column are given later on.



*Light Mortar Detachment**1st Independent Anti-Tank Battalion**1st Battery Anti-Aircraft Regiment less 3 guns**2nd Battery 33rd Mountain Artillery Regiment**3rd Medium Artillery Regiment less 2nd Battery**2nd Battery 18th Medium Artillery Regiment**1st Company 33rd Divisional Engineer Regiment**Transport units, Field Ambulance, Water Purification Section etc. etc.*

During the second week of March, the Japanese opened their offensive with two parallel thrusts northwards from Yazagyo. The first axis of Japanese advance was from Sunle to Witok, and the second from Minthami to Maw. Before bifurcating, these columns captured Malu on 11 March and next day reached a line just north of Minthami.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, some parties of Japanese troops appeared near Holkolm and Samdal, west of the road Minthami—Maw, and clashed with 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles stationed there. Witok was attacked by the Japanese with the support of medium tanks, but was saved by the vigorous defence put up by 4/10 Gurkha Rifles and 2 Border. During the night of 15/16 March, one company of 9/14 Punjab holding Puttha, 6 miles east of Witok, was attacked. The attackers tried to capture the guns by rushing upon them with pole-charges and magnetic mines, but were wiped out almost to a man. Eleven Japanese dead were counted, some of them inside the Indian gun-pits,—and one officer and one other rank of Japanese 5th Company, 2nd Battalion 215th Regiment, were captured. About the same time, two other companies of Japanese troops had advanced west and captured Holkolm, pushing back the 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles troops. By 18 March 1944, the Japanese troops had occupied Lenikot and Maipi and had infiltrated on to the track to Angbreshu. The same day, the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade less 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles concentrated at Nanmunta Chaung—Manmaw, having withdrawn from Witok on 17 March 1944.<sup>34</sup>

In the meanwhile, fighting had flared up in the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade and the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade areas also. During the night of 15/16 March, the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade withdrew from Kuntaung to Wangjing on completing its feint attack across the Chindwin.<sup>35</sup> At 0040 hours on 16 March, 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment informed the Headquarters IV Corps, on the basis of local reports, that 200 Japanese troops had crossed the Chindwin at Thitseikkon a few miles north of Thaungdut. Another

<sup>33</sup> Operations IV Corps, 8 March to 31 July 1944.<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*<sup>35</sup> War Diary of 1st Indian Infantry Brigade G Branch for March 1944.



message followed saying that 500 Japanese had crossed over in that area. It appears that the first crossing took place at 1500 hours on 15 March 1944,<sup>36</sup> but by the next day, firing was reported from Sedaw. By midday on 16 March the Japanese, identified as *1st Battalion 60th Regiment of 15th Division*, started attacking Point 2465 and Point 1955 and heavy fighting continued there. Headquarters 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment moved to Yaingangpokpi the same day. Confused fighting took place during the next two days, with 1 Devon and 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment seeking to disengage and withdraw according to plan. On 17 March, Headquarters 80th Indian Infantry Brigade also withdrew from the Yu river-crossing (RP 8688) to Kuntaung and thence to Khongkhang near Sibong on 18 March 1944. When the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade had successfully disengaged themselves and withdrawn to Tamu and Sibong, the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade had also begun to pull from Hlezeik area.<sup>37</sup> The Wellington Plan had envisaged a rapid withdrawal of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade straight into the defended positions, but due to the unexpectedly heavy Japanese assaults against the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade, it became necessary for the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade to hold fast and cover the retreat of the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, Headquarters 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, 9/14 Punjab and one squadron 3rd Dragoon Guards and attached troops withdrew from Hlezeik on 18 March and reached Border Camp (RP 7786). The same day, 3/8 Gurkha Rifles withdrew from Maw through Puttha and Kameik to Hesin near Tamu. On 19 March, Headquarters 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, 9/14 Punjab, 3rd Dragoon Guards and attached troops also moved into "Charing Cross Box" near Tamu. At the same time, the commander of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade ordered 3/8 Gurkha Rifles also to move from Hesin to "Charing Cross Box" in order to achieve further concentration.

By the evening of 19 March, therefore, the withdrawal to the Moreh defences was complete. The 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was then concentrated at Tamu—Hesin, the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was at Moreh and the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade at Sibong, while the headquarters of the 20th Indian Division at Shenam was further back on the road Tamu—Imphal.

During the next few days a number of patrol engagements involving stiff fighting took place, in which the Indian troops were generally successful. During the night of 19-20 March a force, consisting of the troops of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, with one

<sup>36</sup> War Diary of 80th Indian Infantry Brigade for March 1944.

<sup>37</sup> War Diary of 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, G Branch for March 1944.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, Appendix VI.



squadron of 3rd Dragoon Guards in support, moved towards Manmaw to find a party of some forty Indian troops marooned in the area. Near Manmaw village the rescuing force encountered some Japanese infantry and light tanks. In the fighting that ensued, four Japanese tanks were destroyed, one was probably destroyed, and a sixth was captured and brought successfully back to India.<sup>39</sup> In the evening of 22 March a party of 9/14 Punjab caught some 200 Japanese troops in an ambush at RP 778895.<sup>40</sup> Holding their fire till the last moment, the ambush party inflicted heavy casualties on the Japanese. The next day, 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles had a similar success when they caught approximately 250 Japanese in a dry nullah and almost annihilated them.

In the meanwhile the Japanese *Yamamoto Force* had opened its offensive against Tamu. The town was shelled on 22 March and all signs indicated that an attack was imminent, which came at 1700 hours. But the Japanese received an initial set-back when 200 of their troops with carriers were ambushed at "Charing Cross" road junction, just south-west of Moreh, with heavy casualties. At 2100 hours, the Japanese launched another attack, again supported by light tanks, but were repulsed once again losing two tanks which were knocked out. They then contented themselves with sporadic shelling by 75-mm and 105-mm guns during that night and for the next four days and nights.

While the Japanese attack against Tamu was being held successfully a new threat had developed to the north-west of the Tamu area. Elements of the Japanese force which had crossed the Chindwin in the Thaungdut area moved rapidly west and captured Kampang and Sita by 23 March. Sita was reoccupied by the Indian forces without opposition on 24 March. But it was obvious that the Japanese were in a position to descend in force into the Imphal plain from the north-east.

It had never been the Allied intention to retain forces beyond Moreh, and the 20th Indian Division was given the task of holding only the road inclusive Moreh to Shenam. By 25 March, the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade had relieved the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade in Moreh locality and was charged with the defence of Moreh and keeping open the road up to milestone 66. It was also required to be ready to assist the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade to reopen the road between Dampol and Tengenoupal. On 26 March, the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade, less 4/10 Gurkha Rifles and 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles, withdrew to the area Tengenoupal—Sita—Shenam and took over responsibility for the defence of the area from Commander, Royal Engineers, General Reserve Engineer

<sup>39</sup> Operations, IV Corps from 8 March to 31 July 1944.

<sup>40</sup> War Diary of 32nd Infantry Brigade G Branch for March 1944.



Force troops. On 25 March, small parties of the Japanese were reported from Chamol and they established a road-block on the main road at Tengenupal. After three days of bitter fighting the road-block was cleared on 28 March. Other road-blocks were found in the same area on 29/30 March and were not cleared for several days in spite of severe pounding by medium guns. However, since the Tamu—Imphal road in that area had two separate branches and since the southern branch was kept open throughout, traffic along the road was continuous.

Infiltrating from the main Kabaw valley a Japanese patrol reached Purum Chumbang, 4 miles south of Palel on 29 March, but failed to push further. One Japanese company of troops was encountered by an Indian patrol the next day in the area of Seswoiching. To block any further Japanese advance against Palel from the south, 1 Patiala was moved there on 30 March.

By this time the situation in Sangshak—Ukhrul area was becoming very serious and the threat from that direction to the Imphal plain needed urgent attention. The Corps reserve then consisted only of the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade less 1 Patiala of the 23rd Indian Division. To reinforce the Corps reserve it was decided to call for one brigade from the 20th Indian Division. Since it was not possible to hold the ground up to and including Moreh with only two brigades of the 20th Indian Division, the decision involved also the abandoning of Moreh and Sibong areas. The 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade at Moreh had been ordered on 28 March to be prepared to evacuate the position. On 30 March, its Operation Instruction No. 18 was issued, and the evacuation of Moreh started at 0530 hours on 1 April 1944. The 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade reached Palel at 1500 hours on 1 April and came under the command of the IV Corps from 1300 hours the next day.<sup>41</sup> Sibong was also evacuated but the Shenam—Tengenupal area was strongly held with a strong detachment at Sita. The 80th Indian Infantry Brigade after evacuating the positions at Sibong took up new defensive positions in the Shenam area on the evening of 5 April. It was ordered to defend the area to the north of the road while the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was to provide against Japanese infiltration from the south. The two brigades, being the only troops available for the defence of the road, were placed under a single commander. On 4 April two attacks were launched with the object of clearing the Japanese road-block on the upper road but both were repulsed. However, since the lower road was kept open throughout, the withdrawal of the 32nd and 80th Indian Infantry Brigades was possible without hindrance.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



## JAPANESE THRUST IN THE NORTH

The Japanese offensive had so far succeeded as to gain some important ground in the Tiddim and Tamu sectors, but their most dangerous thrust was aimed in the north against Kohima and the Imphal road.

For a whole week after the opening of the offensive in the Tiddim area, no significant developments took place in the Paungbyin—Homalin—Tamanthi area. Apart from a Japanese patrol which crossed the Chindwin north of Thaungdut on 6 March and recrossed the same day, and another small party located west of the Chindwin river south of Paungbyin, the Japanese troops had no contact with the Indian troops on the west bank of the river. However, on 14 March, a party of 40 to 50 Japanese troops attacked a camp of "V" Force irregulars about 12 miles west of Homalin, and was repulsed. During the night of 15/16 March, strong elements of the Japanese *31st* and the *15th Divisions* crossed the Chindwin on a very broad front from Thaungdut to Tamanthi.

From the information obtained later on, it was discovered that all the three regiments of the *15th Division* less about two battalions, had crossed the Chindwin near Homalin with the object of attacking Imphal from the east and north-east and capturing it. *1st Battalion 60th Regiment* had wheeled south to attack Tamu and Sibong.<sup>42</sup> But six other battalions belonging to the *51st Regiment*, *60th Regiment* and *67th Regiment* of the *15th Division* had advanced west, and occupied a large area of the Naga Hills, passing through the Ukhrul area. Beyond Ukhrul, units of the *15th Division* moved south-west to Kanglatongbi and the hills bordering the Imphal plain. The three battalions of the *58th Regiment* of the *31st Division* were engaged in a sanguinary fight at Sangshak, and then moved north-west to Mao Songsang, south of Kohima. Moreover the second regiment of the *31st Division*, the *138th Regiment*, started from Maungkan and Tamanthi and reached Kohima via Jessami and Kharasom in the beginning of April.

Thus the Japanese advance in the north was carried out by two columns along parallel axes. The southern column was composed of the units of the *15th Division* and of the *58th Regiment* of the *31st Division*, and advanced via Ukhrul. The northern column was composed of the three battalions of the *138th Regiment* of the *31st Division* and proceeded through Jessami to Kohima. Both had to cross a wide wilderness of steep hills and trackless forests which only small but well equipped parties of intrepid explorers had so far penetrated. They used goat-tracks which were steep and slippery but the Japanese hauled even their guns over these tracks. The

<sup>42</sup> War Diary of Headquarters IV Corps G Branch for April 1944. Appendix A to IV Corps Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 96 dated 7 April 1944.



Allied commanders, in spite of the experience of Japanese troops, could not imagine that over a division of troops with all the equipment and supplies would be transported over such goat-tracks.

#### THE SOUTHERN COLUMN

At the same time the left wing of the attacking force advanced westwards very rapidly and started attacking the road-blocks manned by 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment on the track Sedaw to Myothit and Tonhe-Thanan before 16 March was out. According to "V" Force reports, the Japanese forward elements had reached SF 1267 by that evening, and they held Augouching area with one battalion of troops. At 1325 hours on 17 March, an Allied Observer Post at Chammu reported that the Japanese were only 5 miles south-east of the place.<sup>43</sup> Continuing their swift advance, they reached Pushing on 18 March and by noon the next day had arrived at Siruhi and Luithar, hardly 5 miles from Ukhurul. The same day, the Japanese came up against the first real resistance at Sheldon's Corner (RK 8991) resulting in a sharp engagement.

From the different reports it is evident that three separate Japanese columns were advancing on Ukhurul, apart from the forces moving towards Jessami. One column was coming via Pushing and Luithar; another through Siruhi and the third moved northwards from Maoku until it encountered 4/5 Mahrattas at RK 9191. The screen of "V" Force positions of observation posts along the Chindwin had already been penetrated, and the attacking force had reached the outer edges of the Ukhurul area which was the main defended area held by the 50th Parachute Brigade. This brigade comprised 152 (Para) and 153 (Para) Battalions and had under command two companies of the Nepalese Kalibahadur Regiment and 4/5 Mahrattas of the 23rd Indian Division.

On 19 March, the dispositions of the Allied troops in the area were as follows:—<sup>44</sup>

4/5 Mahrattas less one Company ...	Sheldon's Corner (RK 8991)
One Company 4/5 Mahrattas ...	Khanggoi Khunou (RK 8695)
152nd (P) Battalion less two companies ...	Sheldon's Corner
One Company, 152nd (P) Battalion	Point 7378 (RK 8995)
One Company, 152nd (P) Battalion	Khanggoi Khunou
Medium Machine-gun Company ...	Ukhurul
153rd (P) Battalion and two companies Kalibahadur Regiment ....	Sangshak (RK 7888)

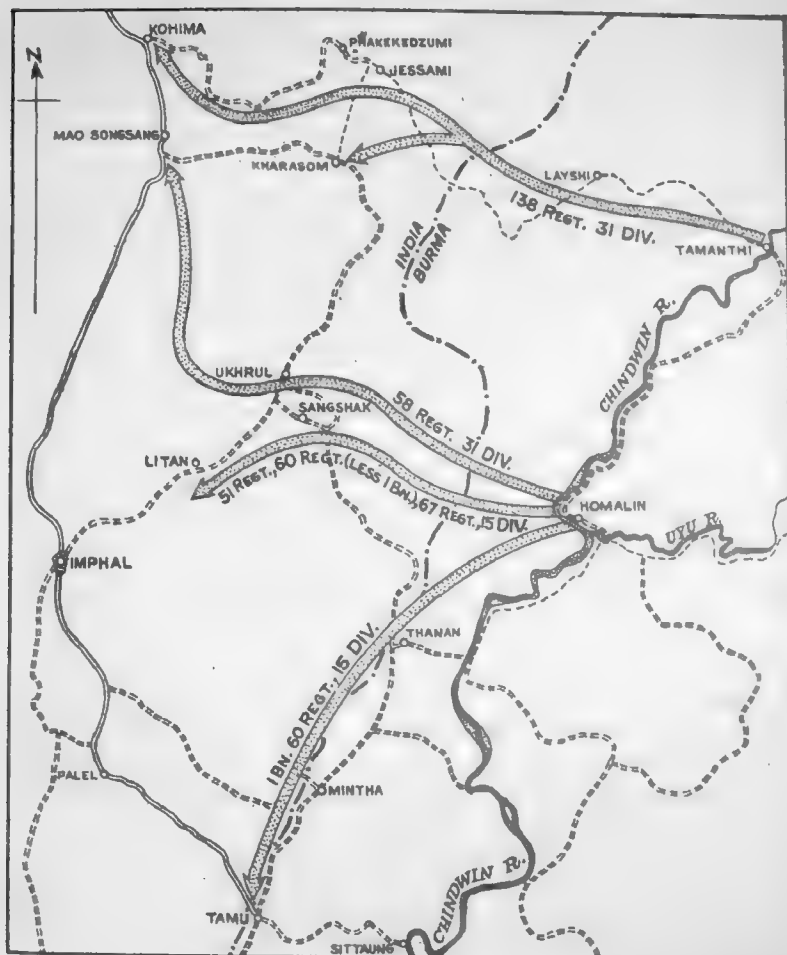
<sup>43</sup> Operations IV Corps, 8 March to 31 July 1944.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*



THE JAPANESE THRUST IN THE NORTHMARCH 1944SCALE OF MILES

ADVANCE OF JAPANESE FORCES





### *Battle of Sheldon's Corner*

As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, three separate Japanese columns were advancing on Ukhrul. On 19 March, one of the columns had reached Siruhi and Luithar (only about 5 miles from Ukhrul) where they clashed with the defenders (4/5 Mahrattas) near Sheldon's Corner. A sharp inconclusive action was fought but the Japanese continued their attacks during the night of 19/20 March. On 20 March bitter fighting flared up again, not only at Sheldon's Corner but also at point 7378 which was held by one company of 152nd (P) Battalion. At 0800 hours on 20 March, 152nd Battalion of 50 Para Brigade reported that the position held by its C Company was being attacked by a force estimated at two Japanese battalions and could not be held very long. During the morning 152nd Battalion had suffered numerous casualties. By 1325 hours on 20 March, A Company of 152nd Battalion had been pushed back by fierce Japanese attack in superior numbers and B Company was being outflanked.<sup>45</sup> All plans to restore the situation by aggressive action had then to be given up, and it was decided to form a defensive "box" at Badger Hill. Consequently, the positions at Sheldon's Corner and Point 737 were given up. The same evening, the box was formed and manned by 4/5 Mahrattas and 152nd Battalion, less D Company of 4/5 Mahrattas and A and B Companies of 152nd Battalion. Further, to concentrate the available forces, it became obvious that Ukhrul would have to be evacuated. So, at 2115 hours the same evening, the Medium Machine-gun Company was ordered to withdraw immediately from Ukhrul after destroying all supplies and dumps. Immediately after, the place was occupied by the Japanese. Meanwhile, reconnaissance was carried out on 20 March for selecting a suitable locality where all the troops in the brigade might be concentrated. The scarcity of water ruled out the milestone 36 position where the headquarters of the 50th Para Brigade was then situated. Finally, after consulting the Commander 23rd Indian Infantry Division, Sangshak was chosen as the concentration site. Although the water supply even at Sangshak was not considered quite adequate for a force including mules, by 1830 hours on 21 March the whole brigade had been hurriedly concentrated there, except 4/5 Mahrattas and 152nd Battalion left at Badger Hill. Lack of picks and shovels hindered speedy digging in, but a rough perimeter was occupied before the night had set in.

### *The Defence Of Sangshak*

Having occupied Ukhrul, the Japanese divided their force into two columns, one moving towards Mao on the main Kohima—Imphal

<sup>45</sup> War Diary of 50th Para Brigade.



road and the other towards Sangshak where the Allied force was concentrated after withdrawing from Ukhrul. During the night of 21/22 March, the Japanese sent "jitter parties" around the Sangshak camp, which were successful in drawing fire from the excited troops and in creating confusion. The next day, at 1230 hours, orders were issued to 4/5 Mahrattas and 152nd Battalion also to withdraw from Badger Hill, and they joined the main body at Sangshak, at 1630 hours the same day. The Whole brigade was thus concentrated at Sangshak, and the order of battle was as follows:—

SANGSHAK (RK 7888)

Headquarters 50th (P) Brigade Signals and Defence Platoon,  
152nd Battalion less C Company,  
153rd Battalion less one company,  
4/5 Mahratta Light Infantry,  
Kalibahadur Regiment less two companies,  
Medium Machine-gun Company,  
15th Mountain Battery,  
582 Jungle Mortar Battery,  
80th (P) Field Ambulance less one section,  
Detachment 74th Field Company.

In the night of 22/23 March the Japanese attacked the Sangshak box in strength. Their main effort, starting at about 0130 hours, was directed to the west and south of the position held by 74th Field Company and 4/5 Mahrattas. The attackers reached up to some empty trenches directly in front of the position but were finally repulsed. The bodies of 3 Japanese officers and 86 other ranks were counted on the perimeter and a large number of important documents were found on one of the dead officers.<sup>46</sup> At 0730 hours on the 23rd, heavy and accurate rifle and light machine-gun fire was directed against the position of A Company of 152nd Battalion from West Hill feature which had been occupied a few hours earlier. Water and ammunition were now running very short and at 0810 hours a message was sent to the 23rd Indian Division asking for a supply-dropping from the air of water, 3-inch mortar bombs, 3.7-inch shells, hand grenades, small arms, ammunition and food, in that order of priority. As desired, supplies were dropped from the air at 1630 hours on the 23rd and again at 0930 hours on the 24th. But, as the area held by the Allied troops was too small, about three-fourth of the droppings fell in the areas held by the Japanese and could not be recovered. Hence the ration of water was fixed at one bottle per man per day on the 23rd, but the

<sup>46</sup> War Diary of 50th (Para) Brigade for March 1944.



shortage was further accentuated soon. The main water-point near the school was under hostile fire and was too far from the lines. Secondary water-points in front of 4/5 Mahrattas and in the Kali-bahadur sector were not adequate for supplying the needs of even those battalions. As much rain water as possible was collected in tarpaulins and tins. But that could hardly meet the demand and the water ration had thereupon to be restricted to only half a bottle per man per day. There was no safe sanctuary for the wounded, and the dead presented another serious problem. Buried bodies were being thrown up by the Japanese bombardment and in the course of trench digging by the defending troops. Most of them started disintegrating rapidly and the stench was terrible.

At 1200 hours on 24 March a Japanese column of approximately 350 men with elephants and 20 vehicles was seen approaching along the road from Sheldon's Corner. This indicated the arrival of more mortars and probably heavier guns, which was confirmed at 1400 hours the same day when 75-mm guns started shelling the brigade headquarters and the B Company position of 152nd Battalion. These were, however, silenced with great difficulty. The worsening situation was temporarily stabilised after a strafing attack by Hurricanes at 1600 hours on 24 March.<sup>47</sup> But patrols sent out earlier reported that the Japanese were holding milestone 36 and Finch's Corner (RK 7688) in strength and were consolidating their position. During the night of 24/25 March Japanese attacks were continuously mounted, causing considerable casualties. This necessitated the shortening of the perimeter of defence which was done at 0830 hours on 25 March. At 1100 hours that day, the Kali-bahadur Regiment reported that their water-point was under heavy Japanese fire and that they had suffered some casualties while attempting to get water. Thereupon several more supply-drops from the air were carried out during the day but they failed to relieve the shortage as, the perimeter held being too small, most of the supplies had fallen into the hands of the Japanese.

Later at 1830 hours, the Japanese started heavy shelling of 152nd Battalion positions and launched attacks supported by medium and light machine-gun fire. These attacks were all repulsed, but the shelling continued during the night, again inflicting severe casualties on the defenders. By early morning next day, the Japanese had occupied the forward edge of the main position of A Company 152nd Battalion, and the situation was becoming desperate. At 0635 hours the brigade commander went forward to 152nd Battalion and ordered that the A Company position must be held at all costs. A counter-attack was launched immediately, but it failed in its

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



Men of the Indian Pioneer Corps  
clearing landslides from the  
Tiddim road



An Indian guard at his bunker  
in Tiddim area





Indian patrol in the jungle  
cautiously looking for the enemy  
near Imphal

Troops of the 5th Indian Division counter-attack near Imphal, April 1944





purpose. Throughout the morning of 26 March attack after attack was launched to dislodge the Japanese from the A Company positions, but without avail. A message was then sent to the 23rd Indian Division to the effect that 152nd Battalion had suffered very heavy casualties and that if the Japanese attacked in strength again it was unlikely that the sector could hold out even for another two hours. Readjustments were also made within the perimeter lest the original perimeter on that sector should be penetrated. At 1430 hours on 26 March, 152nd Battalion was reorganised in view of the very numerous casualties that it had suffered resulting in the decimation of several of its companies, and it was arranged that 153rd Battalion should take over a portion of the perimeter held by A Company of 152nd Battalion. At 1800 hours that evening, a message was received in clear over the radio from the 23rd Indian Division saying, "Fight your way out. Go south and then west. Air and transport on the look out." In a conference at the brigade headquarters at 1830 hours, this message was read and it was decided that at 2230 hours the whole force would move south. Units were to send parties of not less than 50 men to the Field Ambulance to help out as many of the wounded as possible. Preparations immediately started for evacuation. By 2200 hours the Japanese firing had almost ceased. Guns were dismantled before withdrawal and all the stores and documents were destroyed in complete darkness. At 2230 hours on 26 March, the evacuation started.<sup>48</sup> Owing to the dark night, the broken ground and thick jungle, the force very soon split up into small parties moving independently. Apparently the Japanese were taken completely by surprise by this evacuation and they made no efforts to interfere with it.

From 27 March to 31 March, the whole force was moving through the jungle in small parties in a south-westerly direction. Many of them fell in with the Japanese patrols and some were captured. A number of the more seriously wounded succumbed on the way in spite of help from the Naga villagers in the shape of guides and food. The brigade commander reached Imphal at 0900 hours on 31 March 1944, and had immediately to be admitted to hospital with a nervous breakdown.

The 50th Para Brigade and the troops under its command had suffered a serious defeat and heavy casualties. But their stout resistance at Sangshak had held up the Japanese advance for six vital days, thus contributing to the eventual dislocation of their entire plan.

<sup>48</sup> War Diary of 50th (Para) Brigade. According to Operations, IV Corps, Sangshak was evacuated on 28 March, but the War Diary of the Brigade itself appears more reliable.



*Retreat From Litan*

The fighting at Sheldon's Corner, Ukhrul and Sangshak lasting from 18 to 29 March had had another important result for the Allies. While the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade was holding the Japanese in this area, the 5th Indian Division was being flown in from Arakan and was concentrating at Imphal. The divisional advance party had arrived at Imphal on 18 March, and between 19 and 22 March the whole of the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade had been flown in. Other brigades came a few days later but certain elements of the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade were immediately rushed to the front and took part in the fighting at Litan, further down on the Imphal—Ukhrul road. About 20 March, the place was held by rear elements of the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 50th Para Brigade. On 21 March, these troops were attacked by Japanese "jitter parties", but the next morning 2/1 Punjab (under command 123rd Brigade) of the 5th Indian Division and the 28th (Jungle) Field Regiment reached Litan. On 24 March, orders were issued for the remainder of the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade to move up and concentrate on the road Imphal—Ukhrul in the area of Nongdam—Kameng. During the night of 24/25 March, the Japanese attacked Litan repeatedly, throwing one battalion of troops against the position. They suffered about 135 casualties, but inflicted grievous losses on the defenders also and obtained a toe-hold within the defences with their infiltration tactics. By the morning of 25 March, 2/1 Punjab was reduced to a strength of only about three companies. The Japanese were trying to go round and cut the road from Litan to Imphal. The 23rd Indian Division was therefore ordered by the Corps commander on 25 March to move up the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade (of the 5th Indian Division) to Komidok, in order to free the whole of the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade at attack and destroy the Japanese troops near Litan.<sup>49</sup> On 26 March, a telling blow was struck from the air against the Japanese positions near Litan. That day the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade concentrated in the area of Yaingangpokpi, with a company of 2 Suffolk at the saddle at RK 5878. During the night of 26/27 March, the Japanese renewed their incessant attacks at Litan, and kept them up even after daylight on 27 March. All these attacks were however repulsed, and the attacking troops suffered over 100 casualties. But the defenders also sustained losses. There was also the acute danger of the Japanese cutting the road from Litan to Imphal and thus trapping the defenders. It was decided, therefore,

<sup>49</sup> Operations, IV Corps.

Since the fly-in of the 5th Indian Division to Imphal was not complete yet, the 123rd Brigade and the 9th Brigade of the Division were temporarily under command of 23rd Indian Division.



to withdraw the troops at Litan, and on 27 March the position was successfully evacuated.<sup>50</sup>

### *Cutting of the road Imphal—Kohima*

After the capture of Ukhrul and Litan, the 58th Regiment of the 31st Division struck out north-west, through the hills towards Maram on the road Imphal—Dimapur, while the units of the 15th Division again split up into two columns. One column moved south-west directly towards Imphal. It probably had high hopes of advancing into the Imphal plain. But by the end of March, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade and the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 5th Indian Division had arrived at Imphal, apart from the units of the 23rd Indian Division and the 254th Tank Brigade already in Corps reserve. The Japanese, therefore, were confronted with far superior numbers there. Advance for them was quite impossible, and they soon found this out. On 29 March, one Japanese battalion was moving along a valley near Pukhao, when suddenly artillery shells and aerial bombs started raining down on them. The open paddy fields afforded no shelter and they suffered about 200 casualties.<sup>51</sup> During the night of 2/3 April, another Japanese party of about 50 men was ambushed at Guanghabi, and lost 30 of their number. During the next night, a whole company of Japanese troops suffered the same fate at the hands of the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade troops at Kameng which was only about ten miles from Imphal on the Ukhrul road, but the Japanese could not advance any nearer to their objective in this area.

The second Japanese column of the 15th Division troops from Sangshak and Litan moved due west with orders to cut the road Imphal—Dimapur. On 30 March, the first parties of Japanese troops descended on the road and blew up a bridge over a small nullah at milestone 105½ near Kangpokpi, and promptly set up a road-block there. Another Japanese platoon got astride the road at milestone 107. These parties established themselves in the hills on both sides of the road and turned back by light machine-gun fire a party of Indian engineers sent from Imphal to repair the bridge on 2 April. The Japanese had also moved two battalions to reinforce these troops, which were hurrying west through the hills between milestones 105 and 114. Some of them moved south towards Imphal and attacked the defended locality of Kanglatongbi on the night of 3/4 April. The attack was repulsed. Another attack, however, was successful against Mapao held by a platoon of 15/11 Sikh who had been flown recently into Imphal. This commanding feature overlooked the Imphal airstrip and the Corps headquarters from a distance of only 5 miles.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, also War Diary of 5th Indian Division for March 1944.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* War Diary of Headquarters IV Corps G Branch for April 1944.



With its line of communication cut and with the Japanese armies pressing on towards it from three sides, the threat to Imphal was obvious. The situation was further complicated by the exploits of the northern Japanese column that had advanced due west from the Tamanthi area and was attacking Kohima.

#### THE NORTHERN COLUMN

As has been already mentioned, the right wing of the Japanese thrust in the north crossed the Chindwin in the area of Tamanthi and struck due west. This Northern Column composed of three battalions of the *138th Regiment*, crossed the wild Naga Hills of the Somra tract, captured Jessami and Kharasom and emerged on the Imphal—Dimapur road near Kohima. The *58th Regiment* co-operated with it, passing through Ukhrul and cutting the Imphal road at Mao Songsang,<sup>52</sup> about 25 miles south of Kohima. This force was known as the *Miyazaki Tai*, as it was fighting under Lieut. General Miyazaki, Commander of the *31st Divisional Infantry Group*.<sup>53</sup> The *Miyazaki Tai* also included *Headquarters 31st Divisional Infantry Group*, a battalion of *31st Mountain Artillery Regiment* and medical engineer personnel.

The route of advance of the Northern Column was barred by the 1st Assam Regiment stationed at Jessami and Kharasom, and the garrison of Kohima itself. As described below, strength of the Kohima garrison fluctuated from day to day, and the forces there and in Jessami—Kharasom area were placed under the 202nd Line of Communication Area.

Hardly two days after their crossing the Chindwin the Japanese appeared at Layshi, on 17 March. Moving rapidly west, they occupied Fort Keary and Kuki by 19 March. They moved from Kuki to Konkailon and thence to Pansat on 20 March. The next day, air reconnaissance reported them at Molke, Soram and Tusom Khulen. By 25 March, clashes were reported between the Allied outposts and the Japanese advance guards along the general line from Jessami to Kharasom. Aerial reconnaissance reported numerous parties of Japanese troops hurrying west over the Somra hills to reinforce their forward units. On 26 March, one Japanese battalion was reported to have reached Khanjang. On the following day, a party of 25 Japanese clashed with 1st Assam Regiment troops at Kharasom and lost 23 of their number in killed and 2 wounded.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> The available records are not clear about the Japanese units involved in the attack on Ukhrul and Sangshak in the fourth week of March. The exact movements of the Japanese *58th Regiment of 31st Division* and units of *15th Division* are also not ascertainable. See War Diary of Headquarters IV Corps G Branch; and "Siege and Relief of Kohima", File No. 1185.

<sup>53</sup> The Kohima Battle, File No. 7268.

<sup>54</sup> Operations IV Corps.



On 27 March, 1st Assam Regiment was located at Jessami, except one company which was at Kharasom. A Burma Garrison Company was at Phakekedzumi while Kohima was garrisoned by 2 West Yorks, 3rd Assam Rifles and the Nepali Shere Regiment. The next day, 2 West Yorks moved from Kohima to Imphal and was replaced by 1/1 Punjab.

On the morning of 28 March, two battalions of 138th Regiment of 31st Division launched a probing attack against Jessami, but drew off when they met stout resistance. During the night of 28/29 March, however, the Japanese attacked again with full vigour, and the situation deteriorated. On 29 March, information was received that the Japanese forces advancing towards Kohima comprised a whole division, and not only three or four battalions as was originally estimated. Orders were given the same day to the garrisons at Jessami and Kharasom to withdraw on the night of 31 March/1 April, the former via milestone 44—Phek track, and the latter via Gazipheha.<sup>55</sup> Wireless communication between Kohima and 1st Assam Regiment had failed, so a message in clear was dropped on Jessami by aircraft. Unfortunately, it fell behind the Japanese lines and gave away the plan, so that when 1st Assam Regiment withdrew, it found innumerable Japanese ambushes on the way back and suffered severe casualties.<sup>56</sup>

At 1200 hours on 29 March, the command of all troops in this area passed to the 202nd Line of Communication Area, and that, in its turn, came under the command of the XXXIII Corps on 3 April 1944. The Japanese, meanwhile, had advanced to the attack on Kohima, as described below.<sup>57</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

On all the three sectors of the Imphal front, therefore, the initiative was passing out of Japanese hands by the beginning of April 1944. Their long-awaited offensive had given them important tactical success and they captured much ground, but had failed to achieve decisive results. The Allied armies had reeled back under the blows but had avoided capture or annihilation, and had inflicted about 3000 casualties on the attackers. In the Tiddim sector, the 17th Indian Division had been forced to withdraw over a hundred miles, but had broken through all Japanese road-blocks and reached Imphal with its main strength unimpaired and with all its transport. In the Tamu sector, the 20th Indian Division had to retreat well

<sup>55</sup> The Siege and Relief of Kohima.

<sup>56</sup> Exact date or details of withdrawal of 1st Assam Regiment are not available.

<sup>57</sup> See Chapter XIV. Those operations are not described here in order to maintain the continuity of the story.



beyond the original plan and had to surrender the valuable and laboriously constructed depots at Moreh and Sibong. But it had avoided encirclement and fallen back in good order. In the north, where the Japanese had employed their major strength, their success appeared complete. They had partially destroyed the 50th Para Brigade and 1st Assam Regiment, captured Ukhrul and Jessami and achieved a major surprise by throwing across those difficult hills about three times the number of men allowed for in Allied appreciations. But even in this sector, their advance had been delayed at Sangshak for several days, thus allowing time for the transport of the 5th Indian Division to Imphal and the 2nd British Division to Dimapur, which gave the defenders considerable numerical superiority in the critical phase of the offensive. Perhaps the fundamental Japanese mistake had been to take no lesson from the failure of their recent offensive in Arakan. The Arakan offensive had failed primarily because the Allied air forces were able to supply and reinforce their ground forces in the thick of the battle, and had thus largely nullified the results of Japanese encirclement of an Allied position. If they had taken due note of this revolutionary development, they should have modified, if not altogether given up, their plans for the Imphal offensive. For, even when the line of communication to Imphal was cut, the Allied air fleets had only to be switched over from other fronts to supply all the requirements of the IV Corps and also to reinforce Imphal at will. The encircled troops were thus able to stay put and force the Japanese to attack them in prepared positions.

However, these factors, revealed to the chronicler by hind-sight, were at the moment far from being obvious to the world. What was obvious was only that the Japanese offensive had met with some initial success but had obtained no decisive result. They had played their trump card, and thenceforth the initiative lay with the defenders. The capacity for further offensive action was leaving them after two years of war, and they were heading towards a disastrous repulse. But before those days could come, there were many bitter battles to be fought and won, and to these let us turn.



## CHAPTER XII

# The Struggle for Imphal

### CONCENTRATION AT IMPHAL

The Indian and British forces had withdrawn into the Imphal plain while the Japanese forces were converging from the north and south to encircle them. Imphal was practically isolated from the bases in India when the road connecting it with Dimapur was cut at milestone 105 on 30 March 1944. The only means of contact with the outside world was through the air ; and the overwhelming air superiority of the Allies had made access possible through an aerial corridor which enabled supplies to be rushed to the besieged troops. For thirteen weeks the land-locked region was the scene of intense fighting, which was conducted in two distinct and mutually independent zones: the Imphal plain under the IV Corps, and the Dimapur—Kohima area under the XXXIII Corps. It will be convenient to describe the operations in the two zones separately. The Imphal plain was the first to face the Japanese fire, and here the IV Corps organised its resistance to attack.

The IV Corps plan for meeting the Japanese offensive was based on pulling back all the outlying troops into the Imphal plain, and then defeating the attackers on its perimeter. The main defended locality around Imphal city was known as the "Keep", which was surrounded by a number of strong points known as "boxes". These boxes were smaller in extent and size and were so organised as to be self-contained in the matter of supplies and ammunition, and were so sited as to be mutually supporting so that an attack against one of them would be met by concentrated cross-fire from several of the adjoining boxes, and that, even if isolated, the box might hold out for about a fortnight. Moreover, there was a mobile and hard-hitting 'general reserve' of the corps concentrated in the central "Keep", whose role was to counter-attack and restore the position. In conformity with these ideas, Headquarters IV Corps was placed within the "Shark Box" at Achambikei. The "Shark Box" formed part of the eastern face of the Imphal "Keep" and contained the Headquarters IV Corps, IV Corps Signals, Headquarters and Signals of Assam Zone "V" force, Burma Intelligence Corps, one company 3 Engineer Battalion and other such units. Surrounding "Shark Box" were other boxes, like "Keeper" to



the north, "Lobster" to the north-east, "Shrimp" to the south and "Sardine" to the west.<sup>1</sup> "Catfish Box" which contained Headquarters 17th Indian Division in the latter half of April, was situated at RK 3766.

The first phase of concentrating all available forces around Imphal was completed early in the first week of April 1944. By then the 17th Indian Division had fought its way back into the plain and was resting at Sengmai. The 20th Indian Division had withdrawn from the Kabaw Valley, Tamu and Sibong, and was concentrated around Shenam and Palel, as has already been described. The 50th Para Brigade had also pulled out from Ukhrul and reached Imphal. The 23rd Indian Division and the 254th Armoured Brigade were also available on the spot. Moreover, the garrison of the plain had been reinforced from outside recently, which proved of crucial importance in the battles that followed. As early as 13 March 1944, the 11th Army Group had informed the Fourteenth Army that the methods of rapidly reinforcing it in an emergency were being considered, and had requested it to forward an estimate of the number of Dakota sorties required to transport by air one brigade of troops.<sup>2</sup> The next day the Fourteenth Army replied saying that 224 Dakota planes could transport one brigade in a single trip. As the Japanese offensive continued with full force and the outlook became grimmer, it was decided to transport the 5th Indian Division from the Arakan front to Imphal and Dimapur by air.<sup>3</sup> The divisional advance party headed by Brigadier G. C. Evans, Commander, 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade, arrived at Imphal by plane on the morning of 18 March. Between 19 March and 22 March, 2 Suffolk, 1/17 Dogra and 2/1 Punjab comprising the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade, were flown into Imphal. The 2nd Suffolk Regiment was sent at once to Kohima where it reached on 21 March. The rest of the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade concentrated at Waithou. On 24 March 1944, Headquarters 5th Indian Division was established at Imphal under Major-General H. R. Briggs, D.S.O., General Officer Commanding the 5th Indian Division, who had arrived at Imphal on 21 March 1944.<sup>4</sup>

Originally it had been decided to fly the remaining two brigades of the 5th Indian Division to Dimapur, and 2 West Yorks of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade was landed there. It moved up

<sup>1</sup> War Diary of Headquarters IV Corps G Branch for March 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Telegram No. 118/Ops, "Operations IV Corps".

<sup>3</sup> It seems that the Supreme Allied Commander and General Slim had decided beforehand to reinforce IV Corps with 5th Indian Division in case of Japanese attack, Cf. *Defeat into Victory*, Chapters XIII-XIV and Mountbatten's Report, Section B.

<sup>4</sup> War Diary of IV Corps G Branch for March 1944.



immediately to Kohima and relieved 2 Suffolk there on 25 March 1944. 2 Suffolk thereupon returned to Imphal to rejoin the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade. Meanwhile orders had been changed and the rest of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade was told to land at Imphal instead of Dimapur. Accordingly, 3/9 Jat and 3/14 Punjab of this brigade and 3/2 Punjab, the divisional headquarters battalion, were flown to Imphal between 23 March and 27 March, and concentrated at Sengmai. Except for jeeps, no transport vehicles of the 5th Indian Division were flown in. Finally, 2 West Yorks also arrived at Imphal from Kohima on 29 March after being relieved by troops of the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade.

The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was the third brigade of the 5th Indian Division and consisted of 4 Royal West Kent, 4/7 Rajput and 1/1 Punjab. These battalions began arriving at Dimapur on 26 March and it was the first arrival, namely 1/1 Punjab, which moved up to Kohima to replace 2 West Yorks.

The Kohima and Dimapur area was placed under the command of the 202nd Lines of Communication Area on 29 March, and at 1600 hours on 3 April the XXXIII Corps took over responsibility for the sector. This was useful and necessary because the Japanese had cut the road between Imphal and Kohima, and the IV Corps had to concentrate all its attention on the coming battles in the Imphal plain. By the beginning of April 1944, therefore, the IV Corps was left free to deal solely with the mounting threat to Imphal, and had the following troops at its disposal for beating the Japanese attacks:—

- 17th Indian Division, consisting of 48th Indian Infantry Brigade and 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade.
- 20th Indian Division, consisting of 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, 80th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade.
- 23rd Indian Division, consisting of 1st Indian Infantry Brigade, 37th Indian Infantry Brigade and 49th Indian Infantry Brigade
- 5th Indian Division, consisting of 9th Indian Infantry Brigade and 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade.
- 50th Para Brigade, less one battalion.
- 254th Tank Brigade, and Corps troops etc.

Moreover, the 89th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 7th Indian Division was also flown to Imphal by 18 April, in lieu of the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade of the 5th Indian Division which was at Dimapur.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944", Despatch of General Sir George Giffard, published as Supplement to The London Gazette of Tuesday, 13 March 1951.



## THE BISHENPUR SECTOR AND THE SILCHAR TRACK

*The Position Stabilised*

On the withdrawal of the 17th Indian Division into the Imphal plain in the first week of April 1944, the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade with 2/19 Hyderabad had been left holding positions on the Imphal—Tiddim road between milestone 35 and milestone 30. The Japanese pursuing the 17th Indian Division utilised the first week of April in planning out an infiltration northwards through the hills. Their units were observed streaming west from the area of Htinzin to Lenikot and to the Tiddim road via Hiangzang. Other units moved north along the hills to the west of the Tiddim road in order to cut the jeep track from Bishenpur to Silchar. As early as 4 April 1944, a large party of Japanese troops was seen moving north of Munpi. On 7 April, there were many unconfirmed reports of small Japanese detachments scouring the area from as far north as Muktikhulen.\* The next day a party of 50 Japanese troops was reported at Khopum. To meet this threat, 7/10 Baluch, then patrolling the Bishenpur—Silchar track was moved to deal with this Japanese party and surprised it while resting in a nullah. But that did not end the threat of the track being cut off, for on 8 April two more Japanese companies were reported moving north from Teisheng. However, the Silchar track was still open on 10 April when a jeep was driven along it from Silchar to Bishenpur without incident.

After receiving considerable reinforcements, the Japanese attacked the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade on the Tiddim road. On 9 April, the forward positions at milestone 35 were stormed after preliminary shelling. The attack, however, was repulsed the same day. The Japanese then resorted to their usual tactics of infiltrating and putting up a road-block behind the Indian troops. One such road-block was formed at milestone 32 but was soon liquidated. On 10 April again a party of 200 Japanese troops with animal transport tried to outflank the milestone 35 position from the west. They were engaged by Indian artillery and the attempt was nipped in the bud. The Japanese suffered heavy casualties but continued their pressure receiving further reinforcements every day.

On 10 April, the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was moved to relieve the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade and operations in the Bishenpur sector were entrusted to the 17th Indian Division which was constituted as the Corps reserve. 3/8 Gurkha Rifles, the advanced guard of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, arrived in the area on 13 April. But before that, the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade

\*Operations IV Corps, 8 March to 31 July 1944.



was forced to withdraw to milestone 27. Japanese pressure was increasing along the whole sector. On 13 April, they succeeded in blowing up the bridge at milestone 51 on the Silchar track despite the presence of a contingent of troops guarding it.<sup>7</sup> Japanese troops of the strength of one battalion were reported in Gothol as also a number of light tanks and carriers at milestone 32. The next day, an Indian patrol reported that a party of Japanese troops with 500 mules was moving north from milestone 42. The patrol itself was responsible for the dispersal of another party of 50 Japanese troops with 25 elephants near the same area. During the night of 14/15 April, the Japanese launched an attack against the headquarters of the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade at milestone 27 but they were repulsed after a brief engagement. The Japanese were infiltrating through the hills to the west and had already cut the Silchar track. It was evident that the position at milestone 27 held by the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade could not be held much longer. Hence the decision was taken to withdraw to Bishenpur where the Silchar track joined the Tiddim road and then to hold fast there. By 15 April the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 20th Indian Division had concentrated at Bishenpur and the 49th Indian Infantry had withdrawn from milestone 27 through Bishenpur to Imphal. The 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was immediately involved in action and, on 16 April, one Company of 3/8 Gurkha Rifles supported by a troop of the 7th Cavalry attacked and captured Kungpi, a village which commanded the Silchar track.<sup>8</sup> But the Japanese immediately counter-attacked, drove back the Gurkha company and firmly established themselves on the feature. More Japanese reinforcements kept trickling in. By 18 April, the 213th Regiment less two battalions, the 215th Regiment less two companies and the whole of the 214th Regiment had reached the area south of Bishenpur. The same day the Japanese tried to repeat the orthodox manoeuvre of outflanking the Indian position and sent a column of 500 troops north through Thumkhong Lok. If they were allowed to get behind the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade position at Bishenpur a further withdrawal would have become necessary. To counter this threat, therefore, 1/4 Gurkha Rifles from the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade and 4/12 Frontier Force Regiment which was the headquarters battalion of the 17th Indian Division were sent to Bishenpur on 19 April and were placed under command of the 32nd Brigade.

<sup>7</sup> This was a three hundred feet "Suspension Bridge" over a deep gorge. Under cover of darkness, and in the confusion of the fighting, 3 Japanese managed to reach the bridge. After placing the demolition charge and lighting the fuse, one of the Japanese jumped to his death in the gorge, the other two calmly blew themselves up with the bridge. Cf. Slim: *Defeat into victory*, p. 329.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* War Diary of Headquarters 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade G Branch for April 1944.



Although the 3/8 Gurkha Rifles stationed near Kungpi stubbornly resisted all Japanese attempts to force through the passage to the north, it apparently failed to prevent small parties of Japanese troops infiltrating round the positions and reaching the hills west of Imphal plain. At any rate Indian reconnaissance patrols found Japanese troops at Khoirok and Nunggang north-west of Bishenpur. On 20 April, another Japanese force was reported at Ningthoukhong to the east of the Tiddim Road.<sup>9</sup> On 22 April, this column was attacked from the air and two companies of 1/4 Gurkha Rifles supported by two troops of the 3rd Dragoon Guard then moved in to annihilate it. But the attackers were met by withering medium machine-gun fire and suffered 70 casualties. One Lee tank was hit by a captured two-pounder gun and was burnt out. The attack failed. Exchanges between the opposing artillery went on and the Allied guns destroyed two Japanese ammunition dumps on 22 April. The attack on Ningthoukhong was repeated on 25 April when 1/4 Gurkha Rifles again stormed the position with tank support but the Gurkhas were repulsed once more suffering the loss of four tanks. The effort to capture Ningthoukhong was then given up.

Meanwhile Japanese pressure against 3/8 Gurkha Rifles at Kungpi was mounting up. One attack was launched during the night of 22/23 April and another on the night of 25/26 April. Medium and field guns were liberally used to give support to the Japanese attacks. The Silchar track was then cut at milestone 30 and milestone 27 in the night of 25/26 April. About this time approximately 700 Japanese troops were seen between milestone 28 and Luanglong Khulen. In the Khoirok area also a force of another 300 Japanese troops was estimated to be present. On 28 April, 1/4 Gurkha Rifles was attacked at milestone 21 of the Silchar track. The attack was repulsed and about 40 casualties were inflicted on the Japanese. At the same time 4/12 Frontier Force Regiment launched a successful attack on the Japanese position near Nunggang. By 30 April, the road-block at milestone 22 on the Silchar track had been cleared and opened to convoys, but the Japanese placed other road-blocks between milestone 31 and 27 and destroyed two bridges. On 2 May 1944, 1/4 Gurkha Rifles proceeded to clear the Japanese bunkers south of milestone 22. The Gurkhas mounted two spirited attacks but had to withdraw on both the occasions.<sup>10</sup> Another attack on 4 May against Kokaden also proved unsuccessful. Both the sides had suffered casualties in these encounters, but till the end of the first week of May 1944, the whole situation in the area over the Silchar track was confused in the extreme. The

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



Japanese had infiltrated in innumerable small parties and were occupying positions behind the forward Indian troops in the hills near Khoirok.

### *The 17th Indian Division Back to the Battle*

In order to extricate the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade from the confused stalemate just described, and to destroy their old opponents, the Japanese 33rd Division, the 17th Indian Division was sent forward to the area again. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade of this division took over the defence of the Bishenpur area from the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade on 9 May 1944, and the latter was given charge of operations along the Silchar track and was ordered to conduct offensive operations to the north and south of it.<sup>11</sup> Headquarters 17th Indian Division arrived at Sadal Leikai near milestone 10 on 11 May 1944.<sup>12</sup>

The plan adopted by the 17th Indian Division required the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, which came under its command, to clear the Japanese from their positions in the hills north and south of the Silchar track. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was to advance southwards to Ningthoukhong and thence to Moirang and Tharoi-lok. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was to move in a wide left hook from Imphal along the parallel road to the east leading to Shuganu and strike off west from Waikhong. It was to advance via Sagang to capture Point 3404 at RK 1213 and establish a road-block behind the Japanese at milestone 32 on the Tiddim Road.<sup>13</sup> Exploiting this outflanking manoeuvre it was to attack and seize Gothol and Point 6918 at RK 0520. As a result of these manoeuvres, it was expected that the Japanese forward line would be pushed back to the area of Churachandpur.

Before this plan was put into operation further fighting had taken place as a result of continued Japanese pressure. As early as 6 May 1944, a Japanese force was reported in Khoijuman, while another group probably of the strength of one battalion was at Kha Aimol. These villages were to the south-east and south-west of Bishenpur, respectively, and were supplied by the Japanese strong-point at Ningthoukhong. Early on 6 May, a platoon patrol from 9/14 Punjab of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade raided Khoijuman and surprised a Japanese party in possession of two guns. They were caught in the act of brewing tea and had to withdraw hurriedly with the loss of both their guns. The noise of the fighting attracted another platoon patrol of 9/14 Punjab which reached the area and captured

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 17th Indian Division for May 1944.

<sup>13</sup> War Diary of 48th Indian Light Brigade for May 1944, 48th Brigade Operation Order No. 45 dated 10 May 1944.



another Japanese gun. Further reinforcements arrived soon after and the whole Khoijuman position was soon consolidated.<sup>14</sup>

On 7 May, conflicting reports were received regarding the presence of the Japanese in Potsangbam, and a patrol was despatched by the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade to reconnoitre and occupy the village, if possible. Presence of the Japanese being confirmed, at 0100 hours on 8 May 1944, 9/14 Punjab started from Bishenpur for attacking Potsangbam from the west. Artillery support was arranged for the attack as well as the support of half a squadron of 3rd Dragoon Guards and one troop of 7th Cavalry. Progress in the dark night was unexpectedly slow and the day broke before the column could reach Potsangbam. Daylight revealed the advancing troops to the Japanese defenders who immediately started heavy shelling. One tank was knocked out and two others overturned in a nullah. 9/14 Punjab was also pinned to the ground on the western outskirts of the village and was unable to advance further. However, at 1805 hours on the same day, the attack was repeated with heavy artillery support. The 1st West Yorkshire Regiment was sent up as a reinforcement and penetrated some distance into the village. During the night of 8/9 May three companies of 1/3 Gurkha Rifles of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade moved into Potsangbam from the east and encountered a Japanese company dug in and supported by four medium machine-guns. On 9 May, 9/14 Punjab was withdrawn to Bishenpur while confused fighting and shelling continued throughout the day. 1/3 Gurkha Rifles and West Yorks tried to capture the village again on 10 May. They attacked spiritedly but were unable to make much headway. Therefore 1/10 Gurkha Rifles took over the ground up to the middle of the village on 11 May, while 1/3 Gurkha Rifles advanced a little deeper into the thick undergrowth, encountering and liquidating several bunkers.

While 1/3 Gurkha Rifles and 1/10 Gurkha Rifles were trying to inch their way forward in the south-east corner of Potsangbam, the West Yorks were still held up in the west.<sup>15</sup> All day on 11 May, a Japanese battalion gun and a 105-mm gun kept firing on the Allied troops. Moreover, the whole locality was liberally sprinkled with Japanese anti-tank mines, booby-traps and small depth charges. The Allied troops, however, continued their efforts to clear the village and, on 12 May, launched several more attacks. In one sector a few tanks and infantry got across a nullah lying in the 'no man's land' and inflicted heavy casualties on the defenders, but two of the tanks were lost and the attack failed when no corresponding advance was made from the south-east corner. The 13th

<sup>14</sup> War Diary of HQ 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade.

<sup>15</sup> Operations IV Corps.



May was a day of rest and reorganisation. On the 14th, the troops returned to the attack. It was decided to concentrate on the area of Potsangbam village lying east of the main road and to by-pass the bunker-ridden south-east corner. 1/3 Gurkha Rifles prevented any sortie from the south-east corner, while 1/10 Gurkha Rifles cleared the area east of the road. 9 Border carried out a diversionary attack against the west end of the village and two of its companies with four Lee tanks in support moved slowly down the main road clearing mines as they went. By noon that day (14 May) the road was cleared in spite of harassing Japanese artillery fire and numerous mines. Mopping up in the village, west of the road, continued throughout the evening and another troop of tanks was brought up as reinforcement.<sup>14</sup> Fighting continued sporadically throughout the 15th also and heavy casualties were inflicted on the Japanese. A large part of the road was now clear. But in the meanwhile, the crucial left-hook attack of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade behind the Japanese lines had started, as described later. It was decided, therefore, to leave the Potsangbam area in charge of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, and the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade withdrew to Kwa Sipahi on 15 May 1944. The Potsangbam area was retained by the Japanese in spite of these desperate attacks, but it was calculated that they had suffered at least 300 casualties in the operation.

### *The Silchar Track Area*

Meanwhile confused fighting was continuing in the Silchar track area. There were no important developments in this sector from 9 May to 12 May, but a heavy Japanese attack started at about 0200 hours on 13 May against the Scrub Ridge position held by a picquet of 1/4 Gurkha Rifles. The position was speedily overrun and a counter-attack by two platoons at first light the following morning (14 May) was only partially successful. The Gurkhas suffered heavy casualties and were ordered to withdraw. The hill was too steep for tanks to scale and the company of 1/4 Gurkha Rifles which stormed the position was met by withering fire from machine-guns and hidden snipers. In less than two hours four British officers sent successively to command the company were either killed or wounded and the attack had then to be called off.

By the middle of May the Japanese must have realised that they would not be able to force a decision. Though they had won some success in strong local attacks here and there, they had achieved very little from the strategic point of view, and entry into Imphal seemed more distant than ever before. In addition, the effects of exhaustion,

<sup>14</sup> War Diary of the Headquarters 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade for May 1944.



malaria and lack of vitamins were beginning to be felt by the Japanese troops. From 16 May there were signs of their gradually moving away from the area south of the Silchar track. On 18 May patrols found that Tairenpokpi, Kokaden and Charoi Khulen and Scrub Ridge had been evacuated by the Japanese.<sup>17</sup> The important village of Kungpi, however, was still occupied by them and their activity had increased north of the track in the area of Nunggang and Khoirok. This increased activity was probably to cover the secret move of their detachments to attack the headquarters of the 17th Indian Division at milestone 10 on the Tiddim road, described below.

First information of the impending Japanese attack against the milestone 10 area was received on 19 May, when the presence of some of their parties was reported from the hills west of Buri Bazar. On the night of 20/21 May two Japanese platoons suddenly attacked the village at RK 220484 on a hill overlooking the headquarters of the 17th Indian Division.<sup>18</sup> On 21 May another Japanese party of unknown strength entered Laimaran, two miles west of the main road. A composite battalion of 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment and 6 Mahrattas was immediately moved to defend the headquarters of the 17th Indian Division, and, on the afternoon of 22 May, it attacked the Japanese positions in the village at RK 220484. After heavy fighting, a part of the village was occupied but the Japanese hung on grimly to their remaining bunkers. During the following night four separate attacks were made by the Japanese on the Indian troops who had pushed their way into the village at RK 220484, but all were beaten back. Operations were continued on 23 May and by that evening only one Japanese bunker remained unliquidated, apart from a few isolated snipers on the Spur. From information obtained from prisoners of war, taken in the operation, it was found that the entire *2nd Battalion 214th Regiment* had been involved in the attack but it had moved off eastwards in the night of 22/23 May. There were indications, however, of further Japanese efforts to attack the divisional headquarters and therefore 1 Company of 1 Devons from the 20th Indian Division was moved to the Buri Bazar area on 23 May, and these troops were followed by 2 Suffolks of the 5th Indian Division, the next day. The Japanese tried to bring up reinforcements in small batches and mined the main road leading to Imphal every night. On 24 May the Allied tanks and infantry carried out sweeps in the area west of the road near milestone 13 and killed fourteen Japanese. But another Japanese company was reported from Irengbam on 25 May.

A distinct force was then created on 26 May for clearing that

<sup>17</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade G Branch.

<sup>18</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 17th Indian Division, G Branch.



entire area of Japanese troops. It was named Woodforce and was composed of 7/10 Baluch, 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment, 1/4 Gurkha Rifles and a few Troops of 3 Dragoon Guards and 7 Cavalry, placed under Headquarters 50 Para Brigade.<sup>19</sup> The men of Woodforce methodically hunted out the Japanese and liquidated their bunkers and strong-points. The hill overlooking Headquarters 17th Indian Division was cleared within two days, Wainen (RK 1648) was captured on 1 June, and Bungte the next day. Pt. 3351 (RK 1545), the last Japanese stronghold in the area, also fell to Woodforce on 4 June, and the mopping up operations were entirely successful.

Meanwhile, in the night of 20/21 May, a party of Japanese troops had raided the defended area just north of Bishenpur and occupied the mule lines of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade in the village.<sup>20</sup> Counter-attacks were immediately launched and, by the evening of 23 May, the area west of the road was completely cleared, but not without a stiff fight which cost many lives on either side. The whole area was described as 'a carpet of corpses', and at least 200 men of the *1st Battalion 214th Japanese Regiment* were killed there. But the Japanese persisted in their effort and attacked the same area again in the early hours of 25 May. Their attempt was foiled, and a small Japanese pocket which had been holding up traffic on the road was also eliminated with the help of tanks.

On 26 May, the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to hold the existing positions on the Silchar track with only the minimum force necessary and to concentrate the remainder north and south of the track as far as milestone 25 and near Kokaden. The intention was to comb out those broken hills and liquidate Japanese parties which might still be hiding there. But north of the track practically no Japanese troops were found. On 7 June 1944, the brigade was ordered to concentrate in the area of Wireless Hill near Kungpi in order to advance south into the area Kungpi, Kokaden, Lamdal and Ingourek. By 9 June the concentration of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was complete. Patrols were sent out in different directions. They discovered a strong Japanese position at Ingourek, which was attacked on 10 June after two heavy air strikes. The attack failed. Another strong Japanese position was found on a hill at RK 099331. At dawn on 14 June, 3/8 Gurkha Rifles, and 1 Northampton mounted an attack on the hill. They were met by heavy machine-gun fire and had finally to withdraw with the loss of 103 men killed and wounded. But the rest of the Silchar track area was occupied by the Indian troops, including the village of Kungpi. In a chance encounter on 19 June a company of 9/14 Punjab fought a sharp engagement with a party of Japanese

<sup>19</sup> Operations IV Corps.

<sup>20</sup> War Diary, 17th Indian Division.



troops at RK 0743. Similar minor actions and confused fighting continued in the Silchar track area up to 22 June when the Imphal—Kohima road was finally opened.

### *The Operations of the 63rd Brigade*

As has been already mentioned, the 17th Indian Divisional Plan required the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade to advance frontally against the Japanese positions at Ningthoukhong and thence to Moirang and Tharailok, while the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade executed a wide turning movement from the east. Accordingly, the units of the former were disengaged on 15 May 1944 from the battle for Potsangbam, and withdrew to Kwa Sipahi the same evening. They then advanced south-south-east in order to move down the Tiddim road and simultaneously cut the line of communication of the Japanese facing the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade along the Silchar track. On 17 May, first contact was made with the Japanese troops north-west of Kha Aimol. The advance slowed down due to the difficult terrain, but by the night of 18/19 May the whole brigade had reached the Kha Aimol feature. Resistance from the defenders was only slight and, on 19 May, 1/3 Gurkha Rifles turned south and attacked Tokpakhul. A Japanese 75-mm gun which had been harassing the attackers all that morning was located and captured after a spirited bayonet charge up the hill. The same morning (19 May) one company of 9 Border captured a very prominent feature called Op Hill, killing 15 and capturing another Japanese gun. But the area was still full of small Japanese parties dug in at various places. These, with the help of possible reinforcements, drove out 9 Border by determined counter-attacks, but the hill was reoccupied by the Allied troops by 25 May. During the night of 24/25 May, the Japanese attacked the 1/3 Gurkha Rifles positions half a mile north of Sadu. But the attack was repulsed and considerable Japanese equipment was captured. On 25 May, the Japanese launched another attack at Kha Aimol and penetrated the defended perimeter.

These fierce clashes indicated stubborn Japanese resistance in spite of their rear being threatened by the operations of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade described later. This delayed the advance of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade towards Moirang and upset the plan of effecting a junction there between the two brigades. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade could not go on fighting in its isolated position indefinitely. Hence, on 26 May, orders were issued modifying the original plan. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was to make a fighting withdrawal towards the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade, which was ordered to consolidate its position as a secure base and to mop up northwards with maximum available force.







At the same time it was to continue to send out patrols southwards to link up with the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade. This implied that the original ambitious plan of driving back the Japanese lines up to Churachandpur was now given up. On 28 May, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade attacked a Japanese position on Gun Hill but could not capture the entire feature.<sup>21</sup> Fighting continued there until 2 June 1944, when the Japanese evacuated the position leaving behind a number of men and mules dead.

Intensive patrolling and minor actions continued as May 1944 drew to a close. It was noticed that the Japanese were reinforcing their troops in the Kokaden area and patrols estimated that there were up to three companies of Japanese troops there. During the night of 5/6 June, small parties of Japanese troops carried out "jitter raids" in order to draw fire and locate accurately the Indian positions. Early on 6 June, the expected attack started. That on Op Hill (RK 1336) supported by battalion guns and by mortars from Kokaden was easily repulsed by 1/3 Gurkha Rifles. Further west at RK 1035 the attackers infiltrated into the Gurkha positions and by the afternoon succeeded in forcing 1 Company to withdraw. The Japanese attack was supported by flame throwers and by artillery fire from Sadu, and though the Gurkhas fought back bravely, they had to withdraw after suffering fifty casualties. As a result of the loss of this position, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was overlooked on two sides. On the following day, therefore, it was ordered to withdraw from the Kha Aimol—Tokpakhul area to Bishenpur and to relieve the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade which was to move to milestone 24 area on Silchar road. Accordingly the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade commenced its withdrawal on 8 June and reached Bishenpur without interference. On 11 June, 9 Border was sent to RK 1941 for a special operation and 7/10 Baluch came under the command of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade as replacement. The next day, 1/4 Gurkha Rifles joined this brigade to replace 1/10 Gurkha Rifles, which was sent forward to Potsangbam.

### *The Left Hook by the 48th Brigade*

According to the plan of the 17th Indian Division, mentioned earlier, the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade started its outflanking movement at Waikhong on 14 May. The next day it marched across the hills. At 1100 hours on 16 May air observation showed that it had established itself on Point 3404, and supplies were dropped from the air to it the same day. Most were recovered by the troops, although some fell into Japanese hands. Reconnaissance

<sup>21</sup> War Diary, 17th Indian Division.



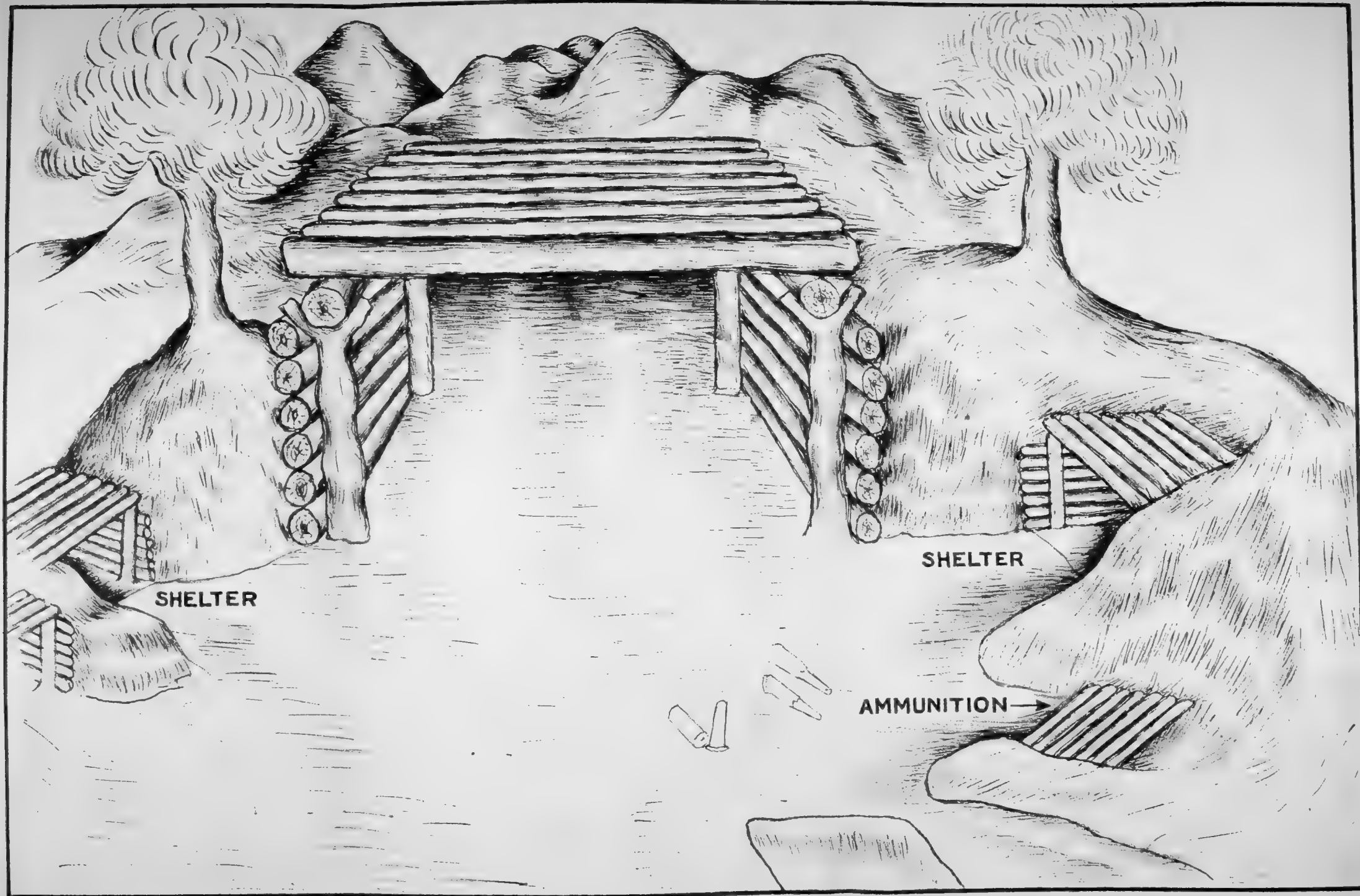
patrols found a large Japanese bunker at milestone 33 and 1/7 Gurkha Rifles advanced to attack it at 0530 hours on 17 May.<sup>22</sup> Tall elephant grass made the going heavy but 1/7 Gurkha Rifles got astride the road and established a road-block on it near a nullah. By the night of 17/18 May, three Japanese tanks were knocked out at the road-block. At 0530 hours on 18 May, eight Japanese lorries were seen approaching the road-block from the south and three more from the north. Eight lorries out of these eleven were totally destroyed and many arms and much equipment was taken from them. In addition, the Japanese suffered loss in men. Meanwhile, on the evening of 17 May, patrols had been sent out by the 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles to Tharailok and to Moirang. More road-blocks were established at milestone 28 and milestone 36 during the night of 17/18 May. On 18 May, the position at RK 1212 was attacked by the Japanese. They were repulsed but returned during the night of 18/19 May to attack the brigade headquarters area at RK 1312. This attack also was repulsed. Another Japanese attack the same night against the road-block at milestone 33 suffered the same fate and 200 casualties were inflicted on them. On 21 May, the patrol directed against Moirang returned without achieving any particular result. At about 1700 hours on 23 May, the road-block was attacked in force by the Japanese after heavy artillery and mortar fire. The attackers were again thrown back losing 80 of their number on the battlefield. A further night attack cost the Japanese another 25 casualties. Up to this period the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade in that operation had killed 366 Japanese for certain and greatly decimated the *1st, 2nd and 4th Companies of 67th Regiment and 8th Company of 154th Regiment of the Japanese 33rd Division.*

But the divisional plan was already going awry. As has been related earlier, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade found it very difficult to pierce through the crust of Japanese defences from the north and was held up in the Kha Aimol area. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was in danger of getting encircled and defeated in detail. On 24 May, therefore, it was ordered to move to Moirang and establish a defensive position and road-block there. By the morning of 25 May, Moirang was occupied except for a small corner in the north. On 26 May orders were received to continue the withdrawal north. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade was to secure Ningthoukhong and establish a road-block south of it and mop up the Japanese in the vicinity. The 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was to co-operate in this attack and send up 1 West Yorks and one troop of medium tanks from the north. These troops were to pass

<sup>22</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 48th Indian Light Brigade.



# A TYPICAL JAPANESE GUN PIT





under the command of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade when it entered Ningthoukhong. In compliance with this order this brigade entered Ngangkhalowai on the evening of 26 May and captured ten Japanese lorries there.

The brigade was withdrawing northwards, fighting and moving as a close square. The 1/7 Gurkha Rifles was its advance guard, and the 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles guarded the rear. The Japanese were on all sides, harassing and attacking the column as opportunity offered. During the night of 26 May, the rearguard of the 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles was attacked at Moirang by a Japanese column advancing with the support of three tanks from the south. Two of the Japanese tanks were knocked out but the Gurkhas also suffered heavy casualties. Soon after, early on the 27th morning, 1/7 Gurkha Rifles reached Phubalowa. Its forward patrols arrived at Thinunggei the same afternoon. Meanwhile the Japanese had pressed close on the heels of the 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles as it pulled out northwards from Moirang. The fighting was fierce in the extreme. Another Japanese attack was launched against the 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles as it was leaving Ngangkhalowai, and both sides suffered heavy casualties in the hand to hand fighting. Nevertheless, by the morning of 29 May, 1/7 Gurkha Rifles, forming the advance guard, reached Ningthoukhong. After fighting throughout the day in an unavailing effort to pierce the Japanese positions it was decided to by-pass Ningthoukhong from the east. During the night of 29/30 May, this manoeuvre was successfully carried out and some casualties were sent forward towards Bishenpur. The rearguard of the 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles was attacked in Thinunggei again during the night of 28/29 May and the southern part of the village was occupied by the Japanese. The Gurkhas counter-attacked valiantly but failed to dislodge the Japanese. They then moved on northwards.

By 30 May, the 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, less two companies, and 1 Company of 1st West Yorks were at Toupopki, and headquarters of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade with 1/7 Gurkha Rifles and the remainder of 1st West Yorks<sup>22</sup> was at Potsangbam. The link up with friendly troops was then virtually accomplished. In the extremely fierce fighting during the previous few weeks it was estimated that the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade had inflicted over 1000 casualties on the Japanese, though its own casualties were also very heavy.

There was a period of comparative quiet in this area from 1 June 1944. On 4 June, detachments of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles

<sup>22</sup> 1st West Yorks and one squadron of 3 Dragoon Guards of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade came under command of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade the same night.



and West Yorks met serious opposition while crossing the "Turel" at Ningthoukhong. There were a number of small engagements that day and the next. At 0030 hours on 7 June, another Japanese attack was mounted against Potsangbam. The attackers succeeded in penetrating into a portion of defences but were finally hurdled back. The same morning another Japanese force with tanks attacked Ningthoukhong from the south. The defended perimeter was again penetrated, but the situation was restored after a determined counter-attack. Nonetheless, undaunted, the Japanese returned to the attack against Ningthoukhong in the night of 8/9 June. The attack was again repulsed. On 12 June, there was further fighting, the Japanese attacking desperately again and again and suffering heavy casualties each time. On the afternoon of 14 June, the area was flooded with incessant rain greatly hindering all movement. The rain continuing up to the 17th, the main line of communication between Ningthoukhong and Awangkhnou was reduced to a water highway along which casualties were evacuated on boats. Ground attacks were hardly possible but the Japanese continued their shelling of Ningthoukhong and Potsangbam. The situation had not changed in any important respect in this area till the opening of the Dimapur—Imphal road on 22 June.

The area of Bishenpur—Moirang saw during these weeks some of the bitterest fighting of the war. The three Indian brigades had to battle against the famous Japanese *33rd Division* containing the flower of the Japanese army. Both sides showed a capacity for sustained fighting and for accepting crippling losses without losing their morale. Neither had achieved decisive success and both had suffered extremely heavy losses. The Japanese casualties were estimated at many thousands and they were reduced to sore straits. Allied losses also had been terrific, the West Yorks for example being able to muster only 154 men in three companies. The Indian units fought equally well. The fierceness of the fighting in the sector may be judged from the fact that three men, namely, Rifleman Ganju Lama of 1/7 Gurkha Rifles, and Naik Agan Singh Rai and Subedar Netrabahadur Thapa, both of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, were awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry shown during the fighting in the month of June 1944. The overall result of these heavy engagements was the failure of the Japanese to reach Imphal from the south.

#### THE PALEL SECTOR<sup>24</sup>

As detailed in Chapter IV, the Tiddim road was only one of the approaches by which the Japanese tried to reach Imphal.

<sup>24</sup> Operations IV Corps, 8 March to 31 July 1944.



Another was along the road Tamu-Palel-Imphal. The attempts made by the Japanese *Yamamoto Force* to advance along this route produced a new sector of operations in the struggle for Imphal, through which passed the shortest motorable road from the Chindwin to Imphal and whose importance was enhanced by the nearness of the air-strip at Palel, on which depended the air-supply of the Imphal garrison. This sector may be named the Palel Sector, and fighting therein extended from Shuganu to Wangjing and Sita, north of the Palel—Tamu road. North of Sita, the country was extremely rugged and offered few approaches or good tracks for moving troops. This belt of wild hills separated the northern portion of the eastern sector from the north-eastern sector around the Palel-Litan-Ukhrul road.

As has been related earlier, the 20th Indian Division had withdrawn to the Shenam area by the beginning of April 1944. Its forward elements held positions near Tengnoupal, although this place itself was held by the Japanese and the Indian troops had withdrawn from Tamu along the upper road.

From information obtained later on, it appears that the Japanese plan was to capture Palel by a double pincer movement. A composite battalion of the Japanese *51st and 60th Regiments* would advance from the north-east and east, while the rest of their force was to operate from the south and south-west. The former were to by-pass Sita in case of serious opposition there and concentrate again to the west of it before attacking Palel<sup>25</sup>

Sita was held by 1 Company of 3/1 Gurkha Rifles which was stationed in the Shenam area. This company was attacked by the Japanese on the night of 4/5 April, but they were beaten back with the loss of twenty men. Repeated attacks on 5 and 6 April and on the night of 7/8 April were also repulsed, the Japanese losing a number of men on each occasion.

There was a lull for a few days, but on 15 April two companies of Japanese troops returned to the attack on Sita. The defenders not only held their perimeter successfully, but also two companies of 3/1 Gurkha Rifles moved out from Shenam and vigorously counter-attacked the Japanese. As a result, the attack was also repulsed and three Japanese officers and 120 other ranks were left dead on the field. After this the Japanese tried to by-pass Sita and considerable movements were noticed on the track from Dolaibung to Sita. One whole Japanese battalion was estimated to have passed west along this track although reconnaissance parties failed to find any trace of them in the thick jungle. Even up to 26 April, 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment of the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade was

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*



unable to make any contact with the Japanese troops who were reported to be in the area of Leitan or to the west of it. That morning, however, a Japanese company was ambushed near Maibi Khunou and suffered six casualties including one officer. Numerous Japanese patrols were reported in the area of Phalbung, and by the afternoon of 29 April one Japanese company had reached RK 5026, only a few miles north-east of Palel. The expected attack on Palel materialised on the night of 29/30 April 1944, when the "Keep" was attacked from the south and the east.<sup>26</sup> Five Japanese including the Officer Commanding *7th Company 51st Regiment*, were killed on the perimeter and another five were hunted down within the perimeter next day. Jitter parties of Japanese troops were active the next night also and raided the "Keep" again, but were thrown out easily.

Meanwhile, there had been bitter fighting in the frontline positions around Tegnoupal. On 9 and 10 April, Japanese artillery fire in the area increased considerably, heralding an impending attack. On 11 April, however, 1 Devon anticipated the Japanese and launched a strong attack on the Nippon Hill position. The defenders were eliminated completely, except for one Japanese who was taken prisoner and two or three others who came out of the under-ground tunnels a day or two later and were then dealt with. However, 1 Devon also suffered considerable casualties. On their side, the Japanese tried to recapture Nippon Hill, but could not proceed beyond the wire entanglements where they left some of their men dead.<sup>27</sup> The roar of that night action was heard on the road near Khongkhang and Japanese reinforcements were probably brought up. During the night of 15/16 April they attacked again after heavy fire from medium artillery. They succeeded in capturing a hill feature just south of Tegnoupal after bitter fighting. South of the Palel—Tamu road the Japanese were attempting to infiltrate on to the Tiddim road and enter the Imphal plain via the Shuganu gap. A battalion of the 23rd Indian Division was operating in that area, but it was considered necessary to reinforce it by sending a detachment of the 20th Indian Division to Wakching. Accordingly, between 13 and 16 April, the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was withdrawn towards that side, and on 16 April 4/10 Gurkha Rifles was stationed at Waikhong. 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles was concentrated at Shuganu, except one company which was at RP 3977; and 2 Border of the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade remained at Shenam under the command of the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade.

On the evening of 16 April, the Japanese attacked Tegnoupal again from the south after a heavy-artillery preparation. Two-and-a-half Japanese companies rushed up the Nippon Hill and, despite

<sup>26</sup> Operations IV Corps from 8 March to 31 July 1944, para 135.

<sup>27</sup> War Diary of 80th Indian Infantry Brigade, G Branch for April 1944.



heavy losses from defensive fire and in bayonet fighting, succeeded in capturing the position. The defenders lost over 100 men in killed or missing. Two more Japanese attacks on a position north-east of Nippon Hill, the same night, were however easily repulsed. Later, during the night of 19/20 April, 1 Devon at 'Crete' was heavily bombarded by Japanese 75-mm and 105-mm guns and then attacked by their infantry supported by five medium tanks. The first two attacks were repulsed with bloody losses, but the third overran a platoon position of 1 Devon. On 22 April, again, the Japanese obtained several important successes. They overran some positions at 'Crete' after heavy fighting and the position at 'Cyprus' had to be evacuated in consequence. Tired after these incessant attacks, the Japanese spent the next week in small raids only which were easily countered by 3/1 Gurkha Rifles in the forward positions. But fighting flared up again in the Tengnoupal area on the night of 6/7 May. Troops of *12th Company 213th Japanese Regiment* launched a very heavy attack against certain positions at 'Crete' still held by 1 Devon, but were thrown back with heavy losses. The attack was repeated the next evening but was again unsuccessful. This time, however, the Japanese succeeded in occupying Lynch Hill a little to the north of 'Crete'. Then, on the morning of 8 May, the Japanese attacked again and captured the western portion of 'Crete', both sides suffering heavy casualties.<sup>28</sup> But the Japanese had now established themselves between the main Allied positions at 'Crete' and 'Scraggy Hill' and the situation was dangerous. The Japanese continued to attack, although without success, the company of 1 Devon which was still clinging to the eastern portion of 'Crete'. Meanwhile, 3/1 Gurkha Rifles was ordered to recapture Lynch Hill and heavy artillery fire was directed on it to prevent the Japanese from consolidating their position. 3/1 Gurkha Rifles attacked Lynch Hill from the north at 0300 hours on 9 May, but was thrown back suffering 60 casualties. The failure to recapture Lynch Hill rendered the position on the eastern side of 'Crete' still more perilous. The feature was then considered untenable and the company of 1 Devon was withdrawn from it on 9 May.

Continuing their efforts to bite into the Allied positions one by one, the Japanese next attacked 'Scraggy Hill' on the night of 9/10 May. 3/1 Gurkha Rifles defending the hill again suffered heavy losses, and the Japanese gained a foothold on the north-east corner. Other Japanese attacks were directed against 'Malta' on the night of 10/11 May. Large-scale "jitter parties" of Japanese troops operated in the area between 'Scraggy Hill' and 'Malta' and there were a number of minor and indecisive engagements.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, Situation Reports for May 1944.







In the course of these encounters, the 20th Indian Division had been continuously in action since the middle of March. The troops had suffered heavy casualties, and were very tired. Orders were therefore issued, on 11 May, for the 23rd Indian Division to move up and relieve the 20th Indian Division. The relief began on 13 May when the latter started pulling out from the forward positions to the Imphal plain and the 23rd Indian Division carried out the relief and replacement of troops, unit by unit,<sup>29</sup> and by 25 May, the change-over was complete, the 23rd Indian Division taking over the defence of the main positions and the 20th Indian Division withdrawing into the Imphal plain. Five battalions of the 23rd Indian Division, consisting of the whole of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade plus 5/6 Rajputana Rifles from the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade and 1 Seaforth from the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade, were concentrated along the Pael—Tamu road in the Tengnoupal area. The rest of the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to attack the area at RK 6115 and strike eastwards. The remaining troops of the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade with 9 Jat under its command took over responsibility for the defence of the area to the south including Kakching, Shaiba, Pael and Shuganu. Moreover, the Nepalese Kalibahadur Regiment was in the area of Sita and Nungtak.<sup>30</sup> On 18 May, Headquarters 23rd Indian Division was opened at RK 4623, two miles north of Pael. About the same date, 3/10 Gurkha Rifles relieved 3/3 Gurkha Rifles at 'Malta' and 'Scraggy Hill'. Headquarters, 49th Indian Infantry Brigade and 4/5 Mahrattas arrived at Kakching and one company of 6/5 Mahrattas reached Shuganu.

On the main road, the period from 13 May to 16 May was reasonably quiet. Most of the forward positions had been handed over to the 23rd Indian Division by the troops of the 20th Indian Division. This was a complicated affair as the troops of the 20th Indian Division had their positions close to the Japanese who had a good view of the road. But the change-over was accomplished without incident. The new task of the 23rd Indian Division in this area was to hold back the Japanese armour and artillery directed against Pael and prevent an advance of the airfield. The Japanese aim of course was to capture the airfield, or render it useless by shelling. On 15 May, the whole area passed out from the command of the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade and was taken over by the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division. Although on the 16th and 17th May Japanese artillery bombardment was heavier, the Japanese launched no major attack.

Beginning from 18 May, the Japanese repeatedly attacked the forward positions at 'Scraggy Hill', 'Malta' and 'Gibraltar'. A

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Operations IV Corps.



number of attacks on the nights of 18/19 May and 19/20 May were beaten back. In the night of 20/21 May, Japanese started a heavy bombardment of 'Malta' and 'Scraggy Hill' positions and then advanced to the attack. The attack on 'Gibraltar' lasted from 1930 hours to 0415 hours but was repulsed. At 'Malta' and 'Scraggy Hill' the fighting continued until after dawn. These initial attacks did not succeed and the Japanese lost not a few of their men. Nothing daunted, they started another heavy attack against 'Gibraltar' on 23 May. The position occupied by 1 Seaforth there, was heavily shelled in the afternoon of 23 May, and during the following night a fierce attack developed on 'Gibraltar' and the connecting ridge between that hill and 'Malta'. By 0600 hours on the morning of 24 May the attackers had occupied the eastern slopes and had signalled their victory by placing a flag on the top-most peak of 'Gibraltar'.<sup>31</sup> However, they were soon driven off from the top by heavy Allied mortar fire. The 5/6 Rajputana Rifles attacked, up the hill, and fierce hand to hand fighting took place. By 1015 hours (24 May) it had reached the ridge just below the peak. There it was relieved by 3/10 Gurkha Rifles which stormed the crest and captured it again. In the fierce fighting for this hill the whole of the *1st battalion of the 60th Japanese Regiment* had taken part. The Gurkhas captured three medium machine-guns, eight light machine-guns and a complete regimental aid post, but suffered heavily in wounded though they had lost only 11 men killed. The 3/10 Gurkha Rifles consolidated itself on 'Gibraltar' while 3/3 Gurkha Rifles relieved 3/5 Gurkha Rifles in the 'Malta' and 'Scraggy Hill' areas. The Seaforth was moved back into reserve on 26 May.

During the next week no major attacks were launched. But on the night of 5/6 June an Indian patrol penetrated the northern slopes of the 'Cyprus' feature (RK 6012) and found one company of Japanese troops digging in there. Unable to penetrate further, the patrol returned. After resting for several days the Japanese mounted a surprise attack against 'Scraggy Hill' on the night of 9/10 June, and overran some of the Indian positions. Counter-attacks were immediately launched, but the Japanese could not be dislodged. Japanese reinforcements were also meanwhile hurried up and a third Indian counter-attack in the afternoon of 10 June was again repulsed. On the night of 11/12 June the Japanese again attacked 'Scraggy Hill', 'Malta' and 'Pyramid.' During the confused fighting, at least 40 of them were killed, and the attacks were thrown back. The fierceness of the fighting may be judged from the fact that between 9 and 12 June, 3 British officers and 31 Gurkha other ranks were

<sup>31</sup> Operations IV Corps; and War Diary of Headquarters 37th Brigade G Branch.



killed and 2 British officers and 151 Gurkha other ranks were wounded in the engagements around 'Malta' and 'Scraggy Hill'.<sup>32</sup>

After 12 June, there was again a comparative lull in the fighting until 18 June, when several Japanese bunkers on 'Scraggy Hill' were stormed and overrun. These bunkers had no visible means of entrance but had inside tunnels leading to the rear. The Japanese also directed artillery fire on 'Malta' and attempted a minor attack on 'Pyramid'. A major attack was probably prevented by Allied guns which harassed and dispersed two Japanese companies forming up in the area for an attack. Thus ended the third week of June 1944 for the combatants ranged along the main Palel-Tamu road.

In the area north of the main road, great Japanese activity was noticed at Khudei Khunou early in May 1944. Arrangements were therefore made for a rapid two-day sweep of the area by the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 17th Indian Division. By 5 May, this brigade and the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division were concentrated at Wangjing. The next day the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade advanced east and had occupied Langgol and Langgo by the morning of 7 May.<sup>33</sup> The village of Khunbi was captured by 1/7 Gurkha Rifles the same day. More minor encounters took place on 8 May, by which time the brigade had inflicted over 100 casualties on the Japanese with negligible loss to itself. The two days allotted for the sweep were over and also by that time the position in the Bishenpur area to the south had deteriorated and occasioned anxiety. Hence the brigade was ordered to proceed there immediately to join the rest of the 17th Indian Division. On 8 May 1944, therefore, the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade took over responsibility for the whole area and came under the command of the 20th Indian Division. It was thus operating north of Palel—Tamu road from 8 May.

On 12 May, 1 Patiala of this brigade captured the Japanese positions at Khudei Khunou after overcoming stiff resistance. The same evening, 1/16 Punjab successfully attacked a Japanese company position near Khudei Khunou and drove back the defenders towards the south-east. After these successes patrols reported that the whole area between Khudei Khunou and Maibi was cleared of the Japanese. On 15 May, Phalbung also was found evacuated, although a small Japanese force was reported on the high ground west of Leitan.

As described earlier the 23rd Indian Division had taken over the Palel sector from the 20th Indian Division about this time and on 18 May, the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade reverted to its command.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 48th Indian Light Brigade, G Branch for May 1944.



On 20 May, the dispositions of this brigade were as follows: 1 Seaforth at Shenam under the command of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade; 1/16 Punjab at Point 4600; 1 Patiala less two companies at RK 5725; one company 1 Patiala at Khudei Khunou and the second company at RK 5126.

After the capture of Phalbung on 15 May, the Japanese shelling of the Palel air-strip practically ceased. It was necessary, however, to clear the Japanese from areas towards the east of the brigade's positions to protect Palel more completely from shelling attacks.

Operations were then continued eastwards. On 24 May, 1/16 Punjab stormed and captured the Ben Nevis Hill. The attack had been prepared by heavy air bombardment by Vengeance and Hurricane bombers and 1 Patiala had stood by in reserve.<sup>34</sup> The Hill had been held by two Japanese companies and therefore the casualties suffered by the attackers, numbering 50, might not be considered excessive. After the capture of Ben Nevis, the Commando Company of 1 Patiala with a detachment of engineer troops was sent forward to blow up the two bridges on Lokchao stream at RK 7005. These bridges were well behind the Japanese lines in the Tenguoupal area and their destruction would have cut the main Palel—Tamu road which was the principal Japanese line of communication. The Japanese had, however, organised a defence in depth, and on reaching the Lokchao bridges the Commando Company encountered stiff resistance. It, therefore, contented itself with blowing up ten vehicles in a mechanical transport park and then returned to the Ben Nevis area.

Between 27 May and 30 May, the brigade headquarters, 1 Patiala and the Kalibahadur Regiment (except two companies) which was under command moved forward to the area of Hambone<sup>35</sup>. The Japanese tried to push them back and launched several attacks on 29 and 31 May. But these attacks were defeated, and on 2 June 1944, 1 Patiala captured Japanese positions in the area of RK 6514. The fighting then again degenerated into patrol activity and minor engagements.

The monsoon broke out during this week. Rain fell incessantly and the hill tracks were washed away. The difficulty of maintaining troops in forward positions was further accentuated. In order to throw the burden of these extra worries on the Japanese, the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade retreated from Ben Nevis on 7 June. The brigade headquarters and the Kalibahadur Regiment concentrated at Nungtak; 1/16 Punjab moved to Wangjing while 1 Patiala remained at Hambone.

<sup>34</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 1st Indian Infantry Brigade G Branch for May 1944.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*



In spite of the grievous losses and bitter disappointments that the Japanese had suffered they took advantage of the Allied withdrawal and once again advanced to the attack on Palel. On 11 June, Japanese parties were contacted at Khudei Khunou. At that time 1/16 Punjab and 4/5 Mahrattas were being sent to the Ukhrul road to operate under the command of the 20th Indian Division. But 2/19 Hyderabad less two companies was holding a position at RK 6227 and one of its companies was slightly to the east at RK 6523. On 12 June, a patrol of 2/19 Hyderabad estimated the Japanese strength at Khudei Khunou as one full company while another Japanese company was reported at Maibi on 13 June. A third Japanese company was at Point 4317 and a few of their troops were in position at Point 4600 near Phalbung. More Japanese reinforcements, including a party of 200 troops with six elephants and forty-eight mules, were seen moving towards Khudei Khunou. Using Maibi Khunou and Khudei Khunou as bases, the Japanese established one platoon at Langgol on 15 June. The next evening the Allied positions in the Langgol area were shelled but the Japanese failed to dislodge them and withdrew their main strength on the morning of 17 June. The next morning, the Indian troops in their turn launched an attack at Maibi hill. They met with withering fire from medium and light machine-guns but succeeded in reaching the north-east edge of the hill. Before they could consolidate their position, however, the Japanese had mounted a fierce counter-attack and threw back the Indian forces to Machi.

During these days the monsoon rains had continued in full fury. Drenched to the skin and fighting without respite, the troops in the front line were completely worn out. No fires could be lit owing to the proximity of the Japanese positions, and, consequently, 1 Patiala had had no cooked food for a considerable period. Many of the men of this battalion were suffering from dysentery and more had been removed as casualties. 1 Patiala, therefore, was ordered to be replaced by 2/19 Hyderabad at Trim Hill and the relief was completed by 20 June. On the same day 4/5 Mahrattas moved to Machi.

By 22 June, 1/16 Punjab had returned from the 20th Indian Division area and was leaving for Shuganu. On 23 June, Headquarters 1st Indian Infantry Brigade moved to Kakching and 1 Patiala concentrated at Wangching. The same day the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade took over the command of all operations in the area north of the Palel—Tamu road.

To sum up, in the Palel sector also the Japanese had failed to achieve any decisive success. In spite of their best efforts, they could not break through the Indian positions at Tengnoupal. The high-water mark was reached when they pressed close enough to Palel to



bombard the air-strip, and then the tide of Japanese advance began to ebb. Both sides had proved anew their courage and tenacity and fighting skill, and had incurred grievous losses in doing so. But the Allied troops could look forward to a steady stream of reinforcements, reliefs and supplies reaching them, while the Japanese were faced with the prospect of a withdrawal under pressure in the thick of the monsoon and with no hope of supplies or reinforcement. Their ambitious gamble had failed.





Indian soldiers breaking cover to put in a charge near Imphal

A 'recce' patrol near Bishenpur sends information back to HQ by radio telegraphy







A Dakota lands with supplies at Imphal, March 1944

A tank patrolling the twisting Ukhruel road





## CHAPTER XIII

# The Struggle for Imphal (contd.)

### THE LITAN ROAD SECTOR

As has already been related, the country to the north of the Palel—Tamu road was a wilderness of steep hills and rocky gorges. This stretch of broken hills from the Iril river in the north to the Taret river in the south may be taken as a separate sector of operations. In the entire sector there were very few approaches to and from the Imphal plain. One approach was along the valley of the Iril river, another was by the road from Imphal to Ukhrul via Kameng and Litan. The two coincided at Gameng, northwards from where the Iril valley was used to approach the Molvum area and the Kohima road rather than to approach the Ukhrul road. The third was from the new roadhead at Tumukhong on the bank of the Thoubal river by rough tracks over the hills towards the east, where there were other tracks running north and south and held by the Japanese, whose main line of communication was supposed to traverse this region from Sarbung to Sokpao via Meiring, Sakok and Kasom. It was felt that if this vital track was cut on a broad front, the Japanese troops moving towards Kanglatongbi would be gravely threatened and might be induced to turn back. On the other hand, if the Japanese could pierce through the protective screen of Allied troops in that sector, they would achieve their goal of reaching Imphal. The Litan road sector, therefore, saw a number of offensive operations by the contending armies, though none of them was pushed home to Ukhrul.

For the Litan road operation, four battalions were selected, namely, 9/14 Punjab and 1 Northhamptons of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade, 1 Patiala of the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade and 3/14 Punjab of the 5th Indian Division<sup>1</sup>. The 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was moved from Palel to Wangjing on 5 April 1944, and was placed under the command of the 23rd Indian Division which was there in Corps reserve. On that day, 1 Northhamptons was at RK 5647, 9/14 Punjab at RK 5731 and 1 Patiala at RK 5763. Starting from these positions, 9/14 Punjab moved forward to Bonginol and 1 Patiala to RK 6464. The Northhamptons advancing between them were delayed by unusually difficult terrain, and reached the area of the track junction at RK 6952 in the evening of 5 April. By the

<sup>1</sup> 1st Indian Infantry Brigade Operation Instruction No. 8 dated 3 April 1944.



afternoon of 7 April, 9/14 Punjab had established itself at Khunthak without finding any trace of Japanese troops. 1 Patiala also reached RK 700639 the same day. On 8 April, 1 Patiala as well as 1 Northhamptons lay close to the track, but no Japanese convoys or supply parties were encountered<sup>2</sup>. It appeared clear that the Japanese were using some other route to carry forward their supplies, and the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade was urgently required to deal with the Japanese attacks in the Bishenpur area. In the morning of 9 April 1944, therefore, orders were issued to 9/14 Punjab and 1 Northhamptons to withdraw to Wangjing immediately, and only 1 Patiala was left in position on the track as it belonged to the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade which was about to undertake a new operation in that area.

The objective of the new operations was to thrust deep into the hills in a north-easterly direction and capture the headquarters of the Japanese 15th Division which was reported to be at Kasom. Moreover, the occupation of the Kasom-Sokpao area from the south would facilitate the advance of other troops of the 23rd Indian Division moving up the Litan road and the Iril valley from Kameng.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Headquarters 1st Indian Infantry Brigade moved to Tumukhong on 10 April. From the roadhead there, it struck out into the hills reaching RK 6565 on 12 April 1944. The Patiala battalion had maintained its ground at Sakok and every effort was made to deceive the Japanese into believing that the rest of the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade also, was proceeding to the same area to reinforce the Patialas for a further search of the line of communication. Behind these feints, 1 Seaforth moved up to RK 7376 with the utmost secrecy on 13 April. Hopes of a successful raid rose high when reports came in of the presence of about 100 Japanese at Kasom, mostly wearing swords only. But when the Seaforth encircled and entered the village at 0600 hours on 15 April, they had left. There were signs of a hurried evacuation, and some documents were captured, but that was all. Reports said the Japanese headquarters was still somewhere near, and search continued for it. During the night of 15/16 April, two companies of Japanese troops attacked 1 Seaforth at Kasom but were repulsed with loss. Then 1 Patiala also moved up to Kasom from Sakok area and, on 19 April, moved out to capture Sokpao. The Japanese launched two counter-attacks and delayed the advance. Strafing and bombing from the air was resorted to, and then, with the help of one company

<sup>2</sup> War Diary of 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade for April 1944.

<sup>3</sup> The strategic objective at this time was to destroy the Japanese 15th Division which was comparatively weak and dispersed, and to reoccupy the Ukhrl area, thus cutting off the communications of the 31st Division and threatening the flanks of both the 31st Division and Yamamoto Force in the Tamu sector. See Appreciation by GOC IV Corps dated 4 April 1944, File No. 8537.



of Seaforth, and Patiala, entered Sokpao at 0740 hours in the morning of 20 April.<sup>4</sup>

The Japanese had suffered many casualties in defending Sokpao alone. The 15th Division appeared greatly weakened and was reported to be withdrawing north towards Ukhrul. To exploit this situation, patrols were sent out by the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade in all directions, and one of them contacted troops of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade on 22 April 1944 near Litan. This linking up represented the closing of a great 'double pincer' and would have been decisive in a different terrain and against a different foe. Nonetheless it was a notable triumph.

Movements of the right arm of the pincer have just been described. The left arm of the pincer had reached the Litan area after several weeks of bitter fighting. In the first week of April the Allied troops were holding positions along the general line from Nungshigum, Kameng and Ukha. 3/9 Jat of the 5th Indian Division was located west of Nungshigum while 3/14 Punjab of the same division was operating northwards from Ukha. Between them the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade was stationed at Kameng. 1/17 Dogra of this brigade was patrolling from Kameng to Takhen, south of the road. 2 Suffolk was probing through the hills north-east of Kameng and had thrown out ambush parties as far north as RK 5882.<sup>5</sup> 2/1 Punjab, which had returned recently from the battle at Litan, was again feeling its way forward along the road and by the morning of 6 April had reached Yaingangpokpi. Moreover, by 8 April the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division had concentrated at Yairipok and from there moved up to Kameng on 12 April.

It is important to note that operations in the Iril valley had two separate phases based on two different objectives. Attacks for the capture of Nungshigum hill area were part of the operations along the Litan road, even though they were carried out by the troops of the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade. For unless this area was captured and consolidated, the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade, advancing along the Litan road, would be open to a dangerous flank attack from the north. After the capture of Nungshigum area, operations in the Iril valley and along the Litan road proceeded on divergent axes. The 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade advancing up the Iril valley became the right hook of the attack of the 5th Indian Division against Molvum and along the Kohima road, which is described later.<sup>6</sup> It is necessary first to notice the operations along the road to

<sup>4</sup> War Diary of 1st Indian Infantry Brigade.

<sup>5</sup> Operations IV Corps.

<sup>6</sup> These two phases of the operations in the Iril Valley will be described separately, one in connection with the operations along the Litan road, and the other with the thrust up the Kohima road.



Litan which led to the link up between the 37th and the 1st Indian Infantry Brigades near Litan.

#### ADVANCE UP THE ROAD TO LITAN

On 5 April, 3/9 Jat of the 5th Indian Division was in the general area west of Nungshigum, while 3/14 Punjab working in conjunction with the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade was moving northwards to clear the Japanese up to the "Saddle" on the Litan road at RK 5878. Other forces of the 5th and the 23rd Indian Divisions were operating in an area in the hills to the north-east of Kameng, along the road near Yaingangpokpi and to the south of the road in Takhen area. On the night of 5/6 April a patrol of 3/9 Jat was attacked by a Japanese patrol at RK 4379 and was forced to retire. The position was however reoccupied the next morning and exchanges of mortar and artillery fire took place. Early in the morning of 6 April another Indian patrol was attacked at Pukhao and thrown back on Wakhong on the banks of the Iril river. On 6 April, the Jats on Nungshigum Hill were reinforced to a strength of two platoons. In the early hours of 7 April they were attacked fiercely by approximately an equal number of the Japanese force. Although they inflicted at least 30 fatal casualties on the attackers, the Jat platoons had again to withdraw. They then called up help from the air force which carried out accurate strafing attacks at 1300 hours on 7 April, and inflicted heavy casualties on the Japanese who were then easily dislodged from the hill by 3/9 Jat. However, no less than 600 Japanese troops were estimated to be in the hills immediately north of Nungshigum and they continued to mount small attacks on the hill. On the two nights of 8/9 April and 9/10 April, the Japanese lost about 80 men killed in these attacks without capturing any position. In spite of these losses and failures the Jat position on the Nungshigum hill was again attacked on 11 April by a force of 300 Japanese troops. A heavy artillery barrage was put down and was followed by wave after wave of attackers. Pressing on regardless of a withering fire from the defenders and the casualties it caused, the Japanese overran almost the entire position within one hour. The following day, however, two companies 3/9 Jat recaptured the hill after a brave counter-attack, but they were ordered to withdraw when the Japanese started encircling their position. But without the capture of Nungshigum, the advance of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade up the Litan road could not be safely undertaken. Hence on 13 April, two companies of 1/17 Dogra attacked the hill again with tank and artillery support, and captured it. By the morning of 15 April, the main Japanese strong points at RK 435747 had also been taken, again with very effective help from the tanks of 7 Cavalry and 3 Dragoon



Guards. Nonetheless, small parties of Japanese troops were still wandering in the area, but the important hill was now firmly in Allied hands. For showing conspicuous bravery in these attacks on Nungshigum hill, Jemadar Abdul Hafiz of 3/9 Jat Regiment was awarded the Victoria Cross.

After the capture of Nungshigum hill and Point 4057 on 15 April, the way was clear for the move of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade up the Litan road. The 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to advance due north up the Iril river valley, while the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade moved up the Litan road in a north-easterly direction. The latter, based on Kameng, was ordered to attack and occupy the "Saddle" on the road at RK 5968. The attack, carried out on 16 April and 17 April, developed flawlessly and the vital position was easily occupied by 3/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles. At the same time, A and C Companies of 3/10 Gurkha Rifles seized the dominating feature at Point 4241, north of the road.<sup>7</sup> By 2000 hours on 17 April the whole area was consolidated and the troops had settled down comfortably. The next two days were spent in active patrolling, and, on 20 April, a reconnaissance in force was carried out by 3/3 Gurkha Rifles towards Litan. Surprisingly enough, the Japanese attempted no major counter-attack to regain the Saddle. Even the reconnaissance to Litan encountered no serious opposition. Therefore, orders were issued to advance up to Litan which was occupied by the morning of 21 April. The next day at 0730 hours, contact was established with the troops of the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade near Litan, as mentioned earlier. A jeep convoy with supplies was immediately sent forward to the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade at Sokpao, for the troops had been maintained solely by air throughout their march through the hills from Tumukhong. At this time, Headquarters 37th Indian Infantry Brigade also moved from Yaingangpokpi to the Saddle at RK 5968.

After the linking up of the troops of the 1st and the 37th Indian Infantry Brigades near Litan on 22 April, another double pincer movement was planned. The objective was the headquarters of the Japanese 15th Division which then was reported to be near Shongphel at RK 6589. This locality consisted of broken hills covered with very thick jungle, Shongphel rest house being the nearest place-name on the map. The plan was for the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade based on Sokpao to advance due north and then west, forming the right arm of the pincer. The 37th Indian Infantry Brigade, starting from the Saddle, was to move due north stringing out its forces in a long line. This line was to act as a stop in the west and to

<sup>7</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 37th Indian Infantry Brigade G Branch for April 1944.



prevent the Japanese headquarters from escaping the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, 1/16 Punjab of the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade captured Lammu and moved up to RK 7286 on 24 April. It then moved up quietly through the jungle in a north-westerly direction. To the west, similarly, 3/3 Gurkha Rifles of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade was replaced at the Saddle by 3/10 Gurkha Rifles and moved due north. By 27 April 1944, 3/3 Gurkha Rifles had reached Aishan. Patrols were pushed further north encountering three companies of Japanese troops at RK 6391 and a smaller party at RK 6288. 3/10 Gurkha Rifles followed up the advance of 3/3 Gurkha Rifles and reached Aishan on 28-29 April. The Indian forces were thus closing in on the Shongphel area from three sides. Japanese resistance was found surprisingly weak and only minor actions were reported. The Allied troops, particularly 3/3 Gurkha Rifles, staged a number of successful ambushes, one of them being at RK 6190. On 30 April, troops of the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade occupied Shongphel and linked up with 3/10 Gurkha Rifles of the other brigade. But the headquarters of the Japanese *15th Division* was not captured. 3/3 Gurkha Rifles stationed to the west reported that no large bodies of Japanese troops had passed them. The jungle was dense and it was felt that the Japanese headquarters was still located in the same area. Searches went on but no further success was gained.

The operation had failed in its object, although over 100 Japanese troops were killed. By the end of April fierce fighting was raging in the Bishenpur area and the 20th Indian Division was being heavily attacked south-east of Palel. Moreover, the problem of supplying the 1st and the 37th Indian Infantry Brigades in that hilly region with inadequate communications was formidable. It was decided therefore to withdraw troops from the Shongphel area on 1 May.<sup>9</sup> By 5 May, the 1st Indian Infantry Brigade had withdrawn and reached Wangjing and was placed into the Corps reserve. The 37th and 49th Indian Infantry Brigades remained in the Litan road area even after the withdrawal from Shongphel, though the Sokpao—Kasom area was abandoned. On 4 May, about 250 Japanese troops were reported in the jungle north of Yengdoupok. Therefore the area was shelled heavily on 7 April and troops were moved up to RK 5280. More Japanese troops were next located at Point 4953 on 9 May and 3/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles was moved towards them. But this detachment was attacked suddenly from the south at RK 5483 and was forced to withdraw.

Meanwhile, orders were received for the 23rd Indian Division to

<sup>8</sup> The 49th Brigade, the third formation of the 23rd Indian Division was then concentrated at Kameng except 1st Battalion which was left behind at Tumukhong.

<sup>9</sup> Operations IV Corps.



move to the Palel sector and take over the positions from the 20th Indian Division, as has been related earlier. On 12 April, 4/10 Gurkha Rifles less two companies was ordered to move to Yaingangpokpi and to advance from there to relieve 3/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles in the Yengdoupok area. The first stage in the relief of the 20th Indian Division by the 23rd Indian Division had started.

The change-over of the two divisions was accomplished smoothly. The 80th Indian Infantry Brigade consisting of 1 Devon, 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment and 3/1 Gurkha Rifles was sent to Kameng and to the Iril valley, facing north. The 100th Indian Infantry Brigade consisting of 2 Border, 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles and 4/10 Gurkha Rifles with two troops of 7 Cavalry and supporting arms proceeded to Yengdoupok area and to the Saddle with orders to operate in a north-easterly direction. On 14 May, two companies of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles reached Yaingangpokpi. From there they moved out to the Dongshum area. 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment of the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade arrived at Kameng the same day (14 May). The next day 2 Border reached Yaingangpokpi. On 16 May, the remainder of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles arrived there, and the same day Headquarters 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was established at the Saddle and Headquarters 80th Indian Infantry Brigade at Kameng<sup>10</sup>. On 19 May, Headquarters 20th Indian Division was established at RK 3556. With the arrival of 1 Devon at Waithou on 21 May the change-over of the 20th Indian Division and the 23rd Indian Division was virtually complete, except for a few parties of 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles on their way from Shuganu.

The task of the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade was to defend Kameng, Point 4066, Point 4057 and Nunghshigum, and to harass the Japanese lines of communication running westwards from the Ukhrul area. The 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to defend Yengdoupok—Point 4997—Saddle area and to operate against the Japanese line of communication around Kasom, Sokpao and Sangshak. Soon afterwards reports were received about Japanese preparations for attacking the Imphal Plain from the east, and then the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to patrol and defend the dominating hill area at Nongmai Ching. A company of 4 Madras was also stationed at Tumukhong on the bank of the Thoubal river to guard against this threat.

On 18 May, reports were received of the Japanese massing troops and supplies in the Sangshak area. The road from Humine to Gamnon was being rapidly improved for taking 3-ton vehicles. Moreover, numerous elephants and mechanical transports were also concentrated at Humine. A force of 300 Japanese was at Sangjing

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



and a party of another 100 Japanese at Kasom. On 19 May, the presence of two Japanese companies at RK 5288 near Sadang was confirmed. Patrols estimated that there were two Japanese battalions in the hills enclosed by the loop of the Iril river. In addition there were at least three Japanese companies in contact with 4/10 Gurkha Rifles in the Dongshum area. On 23 May, finally, villagers reported a large number of Japanese troops in the Phalang area, and that Japanese parties were busy in arranging for supplies at Marou and Sinda. The authenticity of these pieces of information could not be doubted because most of these came from special intelligence units operating in the Japanese held areas.

As if to confirm these reports, Japanese activity increased suddenly in the Dongshum—Yengdoupok—Aishan area. On 23 May a patrol of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles was attacked at Dongshum by a party of 50 Japanese troops. Another patrol engagement took place the next day on the track from Aishan to Lamlai. On 26 May, patrols of 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles based at the Saddle ambushed a Japanese patrol of 13 men at RK 6377 and killed six of them. The Japanese on their part were also engaged in intensive patrolling and reconnaissance sorties. Fresh Japanese troops appeared to have arrived in the area from Kamjong. The line of communication from Humine to Ukhrul and Kasom was showing heavy traffic and was attacked almost daily by Allied aircraft.

On 29 May, one company of 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment was despatched to Nongmai Ching as a result of persistent rumours of an impending Japanese attack through that area against Imphal. It found newly dug trenches in the hills to the east and on 31 May had minor engagements with the Japanese.

North of Kameng—Litan road the main Japanese positions were at Point 4955, one mile south of Dongshum. On 2 June, 4/10 Gurkha Rifles reached close to these positions from the south, but refrained from attacking them because they were strongly held. The next day the Japanese tried to encircle an Observation Post of 2 Border, just south of Aishan, but were foiled in their attempt. On 4 June, 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles found about 50 unarmed Japanese working in the open about one mile south of Aishan. Tents and mules stood near by. Creeping up close to the unsuspecting Japanese, 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles patrol opened fire at 40 yards range and killed about 40 of them. The patrol, which was of the strength of only one platoon, withdrew when more Japanese troops appeared. In a series of smaller clashes north and south of the main road in the area of the Saddle the same day, 30 more Japanese troops were killed.

At the beginning of June 1944, the time appeared favourable for a major counter-offensive. The Japanese 15th Division had never

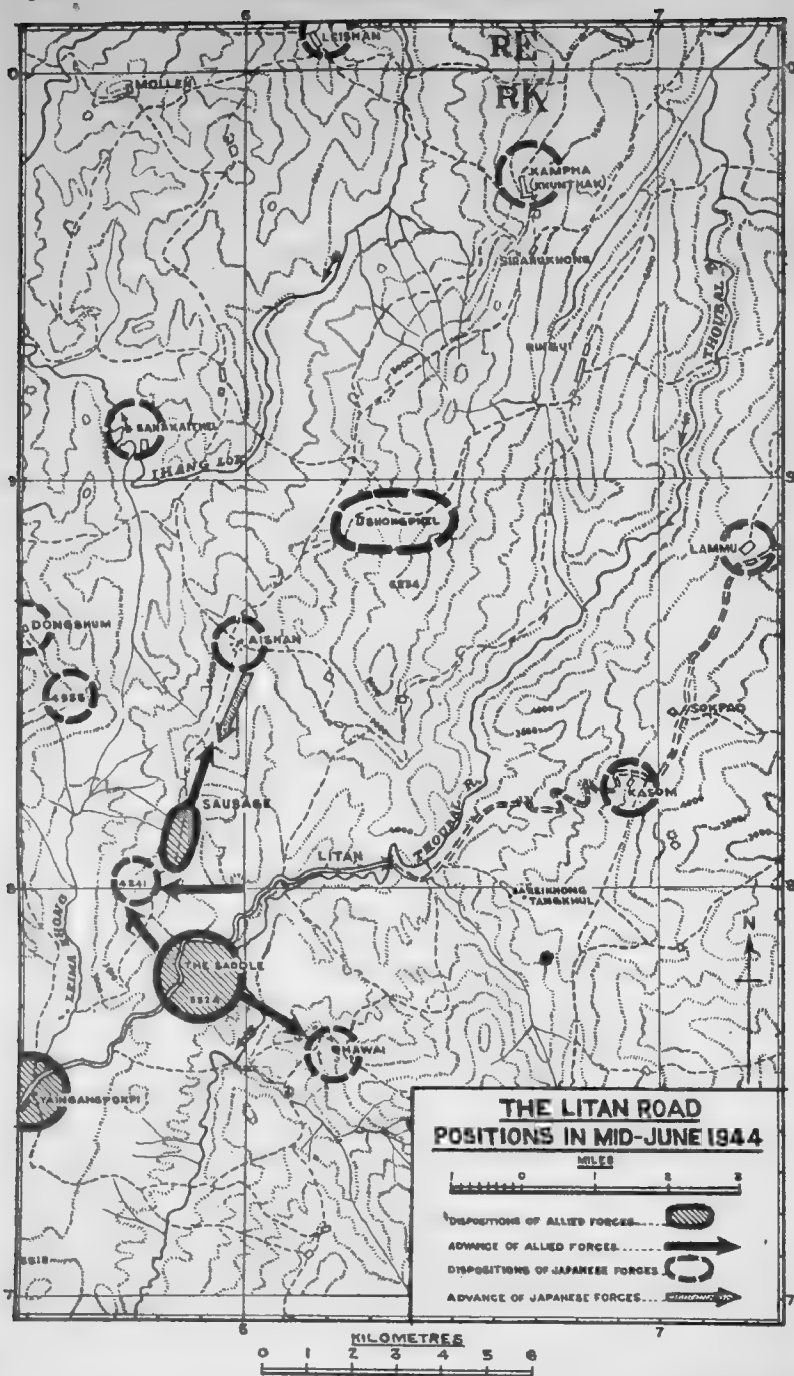


been comparable in fighting strength to their *31st and 33rd Divisions*. At this time, it was sadly reduced in strength by battle casualties and disease. The advance of the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade against Ukhrul, from the Jorhat area, was making good progress. By the beginning of June the brigade was spread in a wide arc from Jessami to Kuki area. Within the IV Corps the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 20th Indian Division could now be disengaged from the Bishenpur sector and sent to reinforce troops in the Litan road sector. Accordingly, orders were issued on 4 June for a deep penetration by the 20th Indian Division in the Ukhrul area. The 80th Indian Infantry Brigade was to advance north from the Kameng area along the valley of the Iril river. After reaching the general line from Chawai to Point 2738, Angam and Laphurak, and consolidating its position there, this brigade was to press on to Leishan and Khunthak. Simultaneously, the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was to consolidate its existing positions north and south of the Saddle area and to thrust north-west from there to Aishan and Pashong. After the expected arrival of the 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade in the Kameng area, the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was to send one battalion to Leishi to establish a base and operate against the Japanese line of communication from Kamjong. If these movements developed favourably, an attack might be launched against the Ukhrul area itself.

But the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade bogged down soon after the start of operations on 8 June 1944. That day a company of 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles attacked Thawai, south-east of the Saddle, but was repulsed with severe losses. The next day, the Japanese mounted an attack with two platoons against the Sausage Hill and hand to hand fighting took place. The attack was supported by Japanese artillery from Dongshum though the range proved too much for most of the guns. Point 4241 nearby was also attacked by the Japanese after machine-gun and artillery fire. The attack was repulsed, though the Japanese held on to a portion of the hill. Another Japanese attack at RK 5382 suffered the same fate. On the dawn of 10 June, one company of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles was attacked again at RK 5486 by a force of about 150 Japanese. This attack too was repulsed and they again suffered heavy casualties. But south of the road the Japanese gained some ground after an attack during the night of 10/11 June on Point 3542.<sup>11</sup> The position, however, was quickly restored by a brilliant counter-attack launched on the morning of 11 June by a company of 152 Para Battalion which had been temporarily placed under the command of the 20th Indian Division. These Japanese attacks indicated a new effort to capture

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*







the vital Saddle position. Two battalions, therefore, were moved to the Kameng area from the IV Corps reserve early on 11 June. By that evening, the entire hill at Point 3524 had been cleared of the Japanese by 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles with the support of Stuart tanks of 7 Cavalry.

This brought the Japanese effort to capture Saddle position at an end. But they still held Point 4241 on the Aishan track and had considerable troops in the hills to the west within the big loop of the Iril river. The ridge between the Allied position at Point 4428 and Mapao Khunou, particularly, was strongly held.

On 15 June, two companies of 4/5 Mahrattas attacked Point 4241 with the support of light tanks, artillery and air bombardment. The company on the left flank succeeded in capturing a number of Japanese bunkers during the morning, but the right wing was brought to a halt by murderous fire from medium machine-guns. The tanks found themselves faced with a nullah which the Japanese had clearly improvised into an anti-tank ditch. One Stuart tank received a knock-out blow from a Japanese gun; another fell foul of a road mine, while a third got bogged in a Japanese bunker and could not get out. The attackers suffered over a hundred casualties and the attack was abandoned at 1500 hours the same day. This was not surprising because, by evidence received later, it was found that on 15 June the Japanese position at Point 4241 was held by *2nd Company 51st Regiment* and another company of either *51st Regiment* or *67th Regiment* of the Japanese *15th Division*.

After these operations there was a comparative lull in the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade area. The Japanese gave up their last attempt to advance down the Litan road. On 19 June, Indian patrols found that Maphitel Hill, Chadong, Monghlam and Itham had been evacuated by them, but north of the road the Japanese defenders still held fast. On 19 June, a patrol of 4/10 Gurkha Rifles was attacked at RK 5783 by a party of forty Japanese and there were other minor engagements also.

Meanwhile, operations of the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade had made some progress. Striking off into the hills on 7 June, the column reached Samusong with no difficulty. The Japanese resistance was very weak and Molkon was occupied in the night of 9/10 June. On 10 June, the brigade headquarters and 3/1 Gurkha Rifles were established there while 1 Devon was sent forward to Point 2738.<sup>12</sup> 9/12 Frontier Force Regiment moved to Point 4049 and Chawai. The Japanese troops in the area were in a sorry plight and were hardly able to fight. Their strenuous operations during the last two months without supplies or reinforcements had left the men emaciated due

<sup>12</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 80th Indian Infantry Brigade, G Branch.



to lack of food, and seriously ill. All the dead bodies seen or prisoners captured—of which there were several during these weeks—were looking extremely famished and reduced to skeletons.

But although resistance from the Japanese was negligible, the going now became extremely difficult due to the outbreak of the monsoon. Under the incessant downpour, the hill tracks became almost impassable. Mud lay knee deep in the valleys, and the streams had swollen out of all recognition. On the hill-sides the track was extremely slippery and the sight of the raging torrents below did not serve to improve matters. Consequently, all movement practically came to a stop. A party with no loads to carry, for example, took seven hours to march five miles. Ten hours were taken by another party carrying two stretcher cases to cover four miles.<sup>13</sup> Sustained operations or major engagements were hardly possible under these conditions, and the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade also remained bogged down in the Chawai area when the Kohima—Imphal road was reopened on 22 June 1944. As a result of these operations, however, the hills within the loop of the Iril river had been practically cleared of the Japanese troops. On 21 June, troops of the 153rd Para Battalion, operating under the command of the 100th Indian Infantry Brigade, reported that Mapao Khunou had been evacuated by the Japanese. Two days later a deserted Japanese position was reported from RK 4986. The plight of the Japanese troops may be judged from the fact that of the twelve dead who were found at this position, almost all had died either of starvation or disease.

#### OPERATIONS ALONG THE KOHIMA ROAD

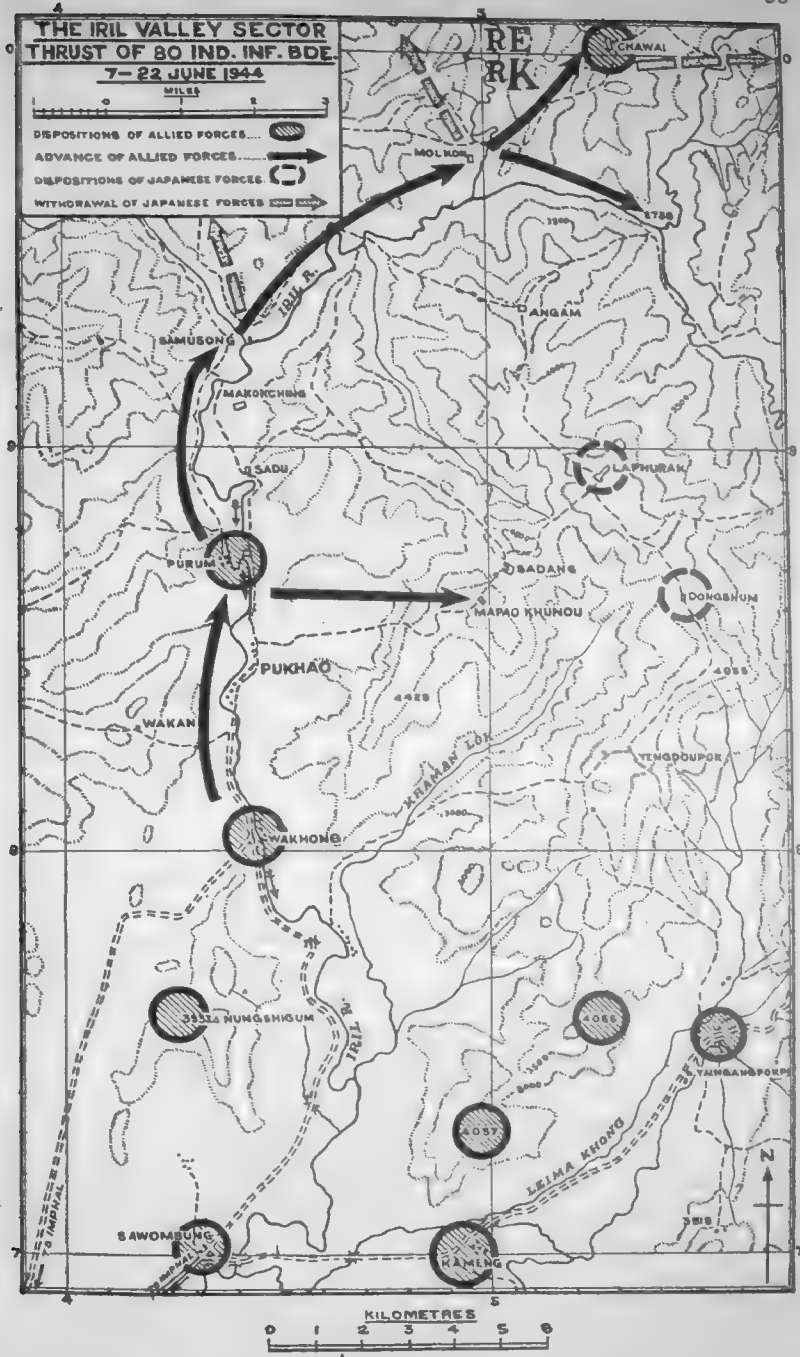
The preceding pages have described the struggle between the Japanese and the Allied armies for the possession of Imphal. It is necessary now to relate the operations undertaken by the besieged garrison of Imphal to reopen the Dimapur—Imphal road and thus restore surface contact with the outside world.

The Kohima Road sector was separated from the Litan road sector roughly by the Iril valley. East of the valley, the hills formed a part of the Litan area, and operations there have been described earlier. West of the Iril valley, the hills were lower in height than those to the east, but they were rugged and dropped down steeply to the Imphal—Kohima road in the west. To the west of this road they rose again to heights of 4,000 to 5,000 feet. The whole area, except some cultivated portions in the lower valleys, was covered with thick scrub jungle.

As has been narrated earlier, the first Japanese troops had reached and unsuccessfully attacked Kanglatongbi on the night of

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*







3/4 April.<sup>14</sup> On 4 April, Japanese parties carried out several ambushes on the road between milestone 110 and milestone 112. They established another road-block at milestone 117 where they destroyed an armoured car engaged on reconnaissance work. In the evening of 5 April, they attacked Kanglatongbi from the north and the east. In the course of the night of 5/6 April they occupied the old depot to the north, while the defenders busied themselves in evacuating all the stores from the depot to the south as fast as possible.<sup>15</sup>

To counter the Japanese threat the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 17th Indian Division was moved to Sengmai on 4 April, where it was to act as Corps reserve. Two days later, the 5th Indian Division was ordered to execute a thrust north against the Japanese positions in the sector. Presumably, the strength of the Japanese forces in the area was not realised, as is evident from the instructions issued to this division, that it should reoccupy the entire area south of a line drawn across the road at milestone 104 which included Kanglatongbi, Safarmaina and Kangpokpi. To the east also, the 5th Indian Division was ordered to clear the hills between the road and the Iril valley containing strong Japanese positions at Molvum, Mapao and Point 3813. The Iril valley was to be the boundary between the 5th Indian Division and the 23rd Indian Division operating along the Litan road. To support these operations, the 17th Indian Division was to hold Sengmai. But, since it was the Corps reserve for meeting any sudden emergency, the 17th Indian Division was ordered to involve only one battalion, at the most, for operations in the hills, from where it would have been difficult to withdraw units quickly.

On 6 April, one machine-gun company of 1 West Yorks and three platoons from the Assam Rifles were sent to Kanglatongbi to stabilise the position there. But when the Japanese attacked that place on 7 April, with a force of approximately one battalion, the perimeter was easily penetrated. From information obtained later, it was found that the *3rd Battalion 60th Japanese Regiment* was involved in the attack on Kanglatongbi.<sup>16</sup> An immediate counter-attack supported by tanks of 3 Dragoon Guards, however, expelled the Japanese from Kanglatongbi. But on the evening of 7 April, the Allied troops were successfully withdrawn from the locality. No immediate attempt was made by the Japanese to follow up the withdrawing troops. But they spread themselves out into the hills to the east and the west. On 9 and 10 April, two Japanese platoons were found on the track south of Makhan and one platoon was

<sup>14</sup> See page 252 above.

<sup>15</sup> Operations IV Corps.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



encountered by Indian patrols at Phaileng. Japanese advance guard were also reported from the Sengmai hill immediately east of the village of that name. On 12 April reports were received of some companies of Japanese troop being located at Modbung and Nurathen, which made it quite clear that the Japanese were concentrating a strong force in the area. In the night of 12/13 April, small Japanese parties tried to infiltrate and create confusion in the forward positions at Sengmai. Guessing correctly that these were probably in order to cover concentration of troops at RK 3278, the Allied commander put down a heavy artillery barrage in this area. The Japanese who were actually concentrating there, dispersed north and east losing at least 60 dead and wounded. In spite of this untoward development, they attacked Sengmai on 13 April, but were easily repulsed.

Checked temporarily before Sengmai, the Japanese fanned out deep into the hills, particularly to the west of the road. A force of over 100 was reported from Haochong. In the middle of April, more reports came of small parties of their troops hovering near Shongang and Samuk. These reports were received usually from the Naga villagers in the area, and it was suspected that they had exaggerated the strength of the Japanese units in order to have a large Allied detachment sent to the locality for their protection.

In the Kanglatongbi—Sengmai area on 15 April, the Japanese placed themselves astride the road at RK 2983. They were immediately attacked by a concentration of Allied artillery and had to evacuate the position. During the night of 18/19 April, the positions held by the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade near Sengmai were again attacked by two companies of the Japanese troops.<sup>17</sup> The attack was supported by battalion guns firing from the hills around Mapao but it was beaten back. The following day no less than 120 dead Japanese were counted on the battlefield, most of them belonging to the 2nd battalion 60th Regiment. On 23 April, Phaileng was occupied by 1/10 Gurkha Rifles in an effort to facilitate the advance of the 5th Indian Division against Mapao—Molvum hills.<sup>18</sup> The same day one of the Gurkha companies reached almost up to the peak of Point 3813 where one platoon of Japanese troops was holding position. The Gurkhas, however, had to withdraw during the night. Advancing again, they captured Point 3813 on 25 April. But when the operations from the Iril valley failed to keep to schedule, the hill was once more evacuated.

Meanwhile, a column had been operating against Mapao—Molvum hills from the east also. As has been mentioned earlier, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade was working up the Iril valley

<sup>17</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 5th Indian Division, G Branch, for April 1944.

<sup>18</sup> War Diary of 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade, G Branch for April 1944.



from Kameng in the middle of April 1944. Some units of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade were also sent there along the road from Imphal to Sawombung and Wakhong. These troops reached Wakhong on 16 April after clearing mines and overcoming stray Japanese opposition. On 17 April, two companies of 3/9 Jat captured the hill at RK 3981. There were reports of concentration of Japanese troops, several hundred strong, near Pukhao; but on 18 April, 2 West Yorks occupied Wakan without difficulty.<sup>19</sup> Japanese resistance in the hills to the west, however, soon stiffened and the going became difficult. On 18 and 19 April, Allied patrols penetrated the neighbourhood of the Molvum area and discovered that it was held by at least three Japanese companies. But the troops pushed on, overcoming moderate resistance from the defenders. By the morning of 23 April, two companies of 3/9 Jat reached a hill at RK 3581, just north of Mapao which was held by one company of Japanese troops. About the same time, 2 West Yorks moving on Molvum had reached a ridge just south of the village, but it was pinned down there by accurate fire from the defenders. An attempt by one company to infiltrate into the Japanese positions from the north also turned out to be unsuccessful. The two Jat companies at RK 3479, just west of Mapao, sustained two Japanese attacks during the night of 23/24 April. They held on stubbornly and beat back the attackers. On the morning of 25 April, Mapao was ultimately taken by assault by 3/14 Punjab and the Jats.

At the same time, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade was slowly grinding its way forward in the Iril valley. The Japanese relied on holding dominating positions in the hills on both sides of the valley and thus preventing the brigade from advancing north-west of the valley. The main Japanese strong-point was on Nungshigum hill (RK 4376) which was captured finally by 15 April as has been already related.<sup>20</sup> East of the valley, the Japanese held the ridge overlooking Kameng from Point 4057 to Point 4066. On the other side on 15 April, tanks of 7 Cavalry were patrolling as far north as Taret Khul but 2 Suffolk was struggling against fierce opposition to occupy Point 4057.<sup>21</sup> 2/1 Punjab was also co-operating with 2 Suffolk, sending fighting patrols to Point 4066. On 16 April, intense fighting continued the whole day, but the Japanese held on to their positions, particularly on a feature called "Sausage" at RK 500745. After a day of minor skirmishes, 2/1 Punjab attacked Sausage position with heavy artillery and air support on 18 April. But it could capture only half the position and the defenders hung on grimly to the eastern half. On 19 April, it became obvious that the Japanese defenders

<sup>19</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 5th Indian Division, G Branch for April 1944.

<sup>20</sup> See page 245 above.

<sup>21</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade for April.





Kohima after the battle: shell shattered buildings, trees and trenches

Shattered remains of D.C.'s bungalow







Sappers repairing the Kohima-Imphal road with all speed, June 1944

A jeep about to cross a stream running across the road





were almost decimated, and the resistance was weakening. Patrols found the area up to Point 4066 clear of the Japanese. The same day, the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade took over responsibility for operations in Point 4057 area, releasing the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade to devote itself to the Iril valley and the hills to the west. The brigade boundary was now fixed roughly along the watershed between the Iril river and its tributary, the Leima Khong.

Then the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade gradually pushed up its patrols north into the Iril valley against slight resistance. It passed Wakan and Pukhao and reached Purum on 23 April.<sup>22</sup> Many Japanese troops were still operating in the hills to the east, and a small concentration was reported from Point 4080 at RK 4979. By 26 April, however, patrols had ranged as far north as RK 4196, and the villages of Samusong and Sadu were found clear of the Japanese. But their strong-points at Molvum proved a tougher nut to crack. The strength of the defenders was considerably greater than at Mapao. The hilly terrain also helped the latter, who had sited their positions with consummate skill, covering every line of approach with withering fire. Hence, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade decided to clear the Iril valley and the area between Wakan and the Ithoi Lok before turning to attack Molvum from the north east. On 27 April, patrols penetrated as far north as Makeng. No Japanese troops were encountered, so one company of 1/17 Dogra was established at RK 4391. A Japanese force was then discovered at Point 4364 (RK 4288) behind the Dogra position, and a larger Japanese force was reported from the area of Point 2715 (RK 3189) on 29 April. Thereupon, 3/9 Jat was hastily moved up to Purum. The Japanese force, however, melted into the forests without giving battle, and, on 30 April, Point 4364 was occupied without opposition. But further north small Japanese patrols clashed with Indian patrols in the area of Point 4036 and Samusong.

Another concerted effort was then made against Molvum. Minor skirmishes continued in the Samusong area but the main units of the 5th Indian Division moved towards Molvum from the north and the south. The Japanese strong-points were reported to be at Point 5521 (RK 3886) Yongba (RK 3986) and "the Hump" (RK 3683). Two Companies of 3/14 Punjab attacked the feature just south of the Hump on 4 May. They reached a position only 100 yards from their objective but were held up there by heavy fire from the machine-guns and light automatic weapons. The same afternoon, 3/9 Jat captured the heights above Yongab. On 5 May, 3/14 Punjab renewed its assault on the Hump and reached only 10 yards short of the peak. But those ten yards were swept by murderous fire and the attackers were thrown back again. The same day, 3/9

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



Jat attacked the hill at RK 381861, only to be thrown back. Hence no decisive advantage was gained by these attacks.<sup>23</sup> The hills were rugged in the extreme and the problem of supply was becoming difficult. It was decided, therefore, to withdraw the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade from the Iril valley and to attack the Molvum area from the west, that is, from the Imphal—Kohima road. Accordingly this brigade carried out night marches in great secrecy and moved round to Sengmai.

The brigade concentrated there between 10 and 14 May 1944, and prepared to strike east into the hills with the support of the 89th Indian Infantry Brigade, which had relieved the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 17th Indian Division at Sengmai on 7 May. The 9th Indian Infantry Brigade moved over into the Iril valley in place of the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade.

Meanwhile, brisk fighting had taken place along the Kohima road. On 25/26 April, 1 West Yorks attacked and cleared the Japanese road-blocks at Kanglatongbi with the help of the tanks from 3 Dragoon Guards. But when they tried to advance further up the road, the Japanese brought down heavy mortar fire and forced them to withdraw. The Japanese then rebuilt their road-block at Kanglatongbi on 27 April and stationed one company near-by to cover it with fire.

On the night of 2/3 May, a patrol of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade penetrated the Kanglatongbi village and found it clear of the Japanese, except for a few posts defended by light machine-guns. Though Kanglatongbi was lightly defended, the Japanese forces had not moved away completely from the area, but were lurking in the neighbouring positions. One of these positions was at Point 3813 which, though found abandoned on 6 May, was again occupied by the Japanese the same night. Similarly, a large Japanese force was reported occupying Safarmaina on 6 May.

West of the road a patrol of 9 Border saw about 75 Japanese troops in small batches on 26 April. They were all heavily laden and were moving north between Ireng and Kharam. Similar parties were also seen in the Karakhul area the following day, but no further developments took place.

At this time the 17th Indian Division was ordered to proceed to the Bishenpur area, as has been described earlier. By the morning of 8 May, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade had been relieved by the 89th Indian Infantry Brigade and had reached Oinam on the Tiddim road.

The second week of May 1944 was spent in intensive patrolling by the 89th Indian Infantry Brigade on both sides of the Kohima road, while the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade and the 9th Indian

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



Infantry Brigade exchanged places. As has been already mentioned, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade had concentrated at Sengmai by 14 May.

After the completion of these moves, the 5th Indian Division was located as follows on 15 May 1944<sup>24</sup>:—

Headquarters 5th Indian Division	...	RK 3270, near milestone 6 on Imphal-Kohima road
Headquarters 9th Indian Infantry Brigade	...	RK 370750, south-east of Mapao
2 West Yorks	...	RK 419783, east of Mapao
3 Jat	...	RK 415828, north-east of Mapao
3/14 Punjab	...	RK 350792, at Mapao
Headquarters 89th Indian Infantry Brigade	...	RK 292768, south-east of Sengmai
4/8 Gurkha Rifles	...	RK 305780, east of Sengmai
2 King's Own Scottish Borderers	...	RK 292768, south-east of Sengmai
1/11 Sikh		RK 300788, east of Sengmai
Headquarters 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade	...	RK 288763, south of Sengmai
3/2 Punjab	...	RK 290750, south of Sengmai
2 Suffolk	...	RK 298750, south-south-east of Sengmai
1/17 Dogra	...	RK 285751, south of Sengmai

Of these troops, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade was given the task of outflanking the Japanese defences at Kanglatongbi from the west and cutting the road behind them at milestone 117. Thereafter, it was to cross over to the east of the road and capture the ridge running north and south through Modbung. The 89th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to defend Sengmai and to capture Point 3813 (RK 3383) and the spurs to the east and west of it. The 9th Indian Infantry Brigade was to co-operate in these operations by pressing up towards Point 3813 from the south-east and by patrolling extensively in the Iril valley. The object of these operations, it appears, was to reopen the Kohima road by 15 June at the latest, because the air-lift into Imphal was not adequate to meet all the requirements, and the supply position would become precarious by then<sup>25</sup>.

The operation began on the morning of 15 May. The 1/17

<sup>24</sup> Location Statement of 5th Indian Division dated 15 May 1944.

<sup>25</sup> Appreciation by GOC IV Corps dated 30 April 1944.



Dogra pressed forward along the road towards Kanglatongbi. On its left, 2 Suffolk carried out a wide turning movement, and 3/2 Punjab operated between 2 Suffolk and 1/17 Dogra. The Suffolk managed to reach the road at milestone 117 behind the Japanese defences, but failed to cross the road to the east owing to heavy opposition. The advance of 3/2 Punjab was impeded by thick jungle and difficult going, but on 16 May one of its companies reached RK 2984. At this point, the company was fiercely counter-attacked and had to withdraw. The two days, 17 and 18 May, were spent in aggressive patrolling by the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade, but on 19 May, 3/2 Punjab returned to the attack. Kanglatongbi was struck from the air for about four hours, and then 3/2 Punjab stormed the position from the south. The momentum of attack was powerful enough to overrun most of the known Japanese positions. But the defenders had organised a defence in depth, and 3/2 Punjab found itself faced with another strong position behind Kanglatongbi. Consequently, the gains could not be consolidated and the troops had to withdraw again. After a day of rest on 20 May, 3/2 Punjab struck again at Kanglatongbi, this time from the west, only to find that the defenders had already evacuated the position<sup>26</sup>, and thus Kanglatongbi was restored to the Allied troops.

Point 3813 (RK 3383) was also captured in the same manner. The 89th Indian Infantry Brigade attacked the hill from the west, with 2 King's Own Scottish Borderers to the left (north) and 4/8 Gurkha Rifles to the right. 1/11 Sikh operated in the centre. On 15 May, one Sikh company infiltrated through a nullah behind the Japanese position and established itself at RK 337838. It was counter-attacked there during the night of 15/16 May, but the attackers were beaten back suffering 31 fatal casualties. On 16 May, 2 King's Own Scottish Borderers attacked the western portion of the Point 3813 ridge and reached the top. But on 17 May, this unit was repulsed in its efforts to capture the main Japanese positions on the ridge, and had to withdraw in the evening when the Japanese counter-attacked. The same day the whole Sikh battalion entrenched itself behind the Japanese position. During the night of 17/18 May, the latter made several desperate efforts to liquidate the Sikhs, but failed each time and lost over 100 dead. On 20 May, concerted attacks were made against Point 3813 ridge by 4/8 Gurkha and 2 King's Own Scottish Borderers. The 3/14 Punjab of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade also co-operated simultaneously in the operations by attacking "the Hump" (RK 357827). The Japanese weathered these attacks successfully, but realised that their position was untenable. Accordingly, they evacuated it during the night, and

<sup>26</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 5th Indian Division, G Branch, for May 1944.

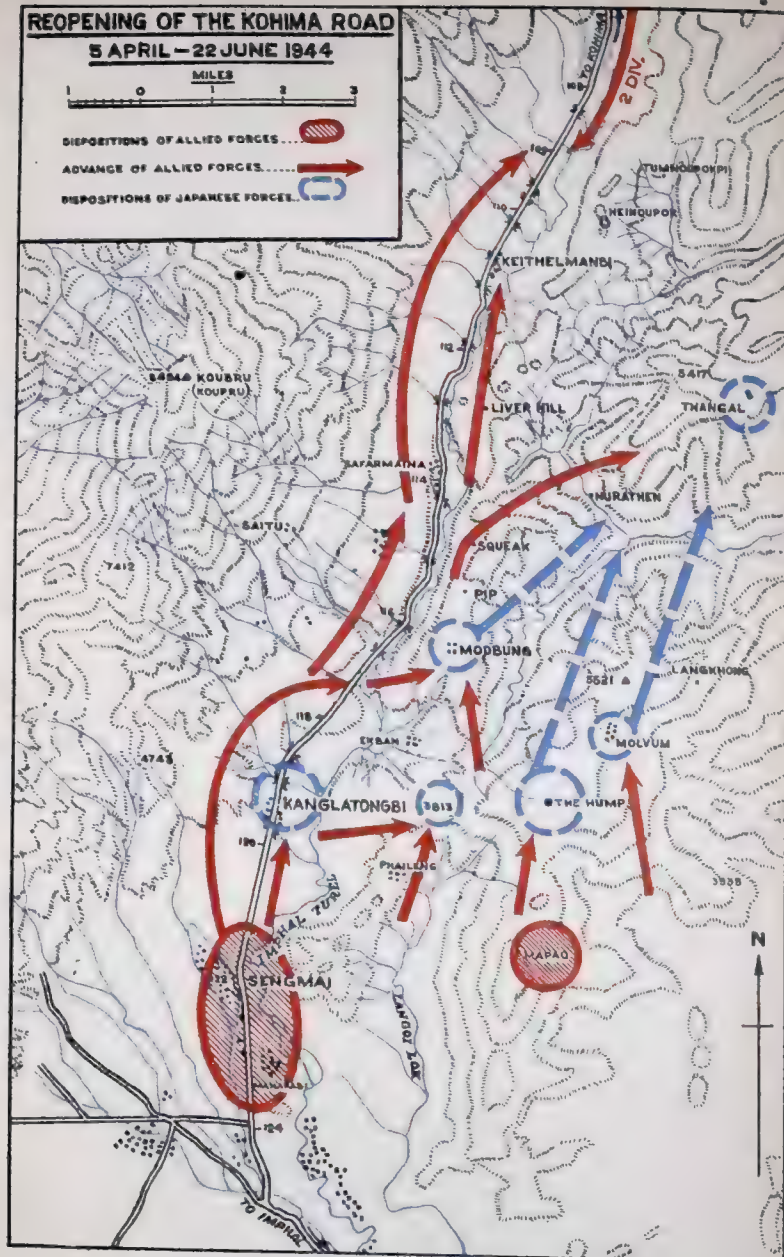


# REOPENING OF THE KOHIMA ROAD

5 APRIL - 22 JUNE 1944

0 1 2 3  
MILES

DISPOSITIONS OF ALLIED FORCES.....  
ADVANCE OF ALLIED FORCES.....  
DISPOSITIONS OF JAPANESE FORCES.....



0 1 2 3 4 5 6  
KILOMETRES



on 21 May, Point 3813 and all the area up to RK 3583 to the east was found clear of Japanese troops by the Allied forces.

The scene then shifted to Modbung and the Hump, where the Japanese had retreated from Point 3813. 3/14 Punjab destroyed six bunkers on 22 May, but failed to capture the position. 4/8 Gurkha Rifles attacking towards Modbung was held up at RK 324863 and RK 333859. The attacks then petered out due to the dogged defence and the rains which made the hill-tracks unpassably slippery. The last week of May, therefore, saw only patrol activity and minor actions, both along the Kohima road and in the hills to the east.

On 3 June, the 5th Indian Division was ordered to destroy the Japanese *15th Division*, located west of the Iril river, and to reopen the road to Kohima as far north as Karong. Accordingly, on 4 June, Headquarters 5th Indian Division issued orders for this operation. The 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade was told to attack Modbung from the west and south. 3/14 Punjab of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade, which had exchanged places on 1 June with the 89th Indian Infantry Brigade, was ordered to execute an outflanking movement through the west debouching on the road near Safarmaina and then driving southwards along the road to meet the troops advancing from Kanglatongbi. The rest of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade was to assist the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade in the operations around Modbung. The 89th Indian Infantry Brigade was to attack the Hump and Everest. These operations were to begin on 7 June.

By the night of 5/6 June, Headquarters 9th Indian Infantry Brigade advanced to RK 1385 and 2 West Yorks established itself in the area north-east of Kanglatongbi. 3/14 Punjab concentrated at RK 3188 and prepared to advance northwards through the hills in order to cut the road near Safarmaina, and on 6 June, it reached the road near milestone 116. Two companies were thrown eastwards across the road to hold "Pip" and "Squeak", two small hill features. Simultaneously, a company of 2 Suffolk established itself near the Japanese positions at RK 3486. The operations so far had developed very favourably but when 3/14 Punjab advanced to Safarmaina on the night of 6/7 June, it was heavily counter-attacked. Two Japanese counter-attacks were beaten back, but the situation was confused, and, ultimately, 3/14 Punjab withdrew a short distance from Safarmaina on 8 June. On 9 June the 1/11 Sikh Regiment reported a force of 100 Japanese troops concentrating at Nurathen. Concentrated artillery fire was immediately opened against them and the party was broken up. Another Japanese party of 350 men moving from the Molvum area to Nurathen, was harassed by fighting patrols. Further patrolling revealed that the Japanese were pulling out of their positions on the Hump and Molvum,



retreating northwards. On 11 June, Modbung area was finally occupied and on the following day the formidable bunkers at Molvum passed into Allied hands. The Japanese withdrew generally to a line running east and west from Point 5417 to milestone 112.

While 1/11 Sikh and 3/14 Punjab were engaged in these operations and were clearing the Japanese from the hills overlooking the main Kohima—Imphal road, other Allied troops were trying to push up along the road itself in an effort to link up with the relieving forces coming towards Imphal from Kohima. On the main road, the West Yorks reached the bridge near milestone 116 on 10 June. There they encountered the strong rearguard left by the Japanese. In the attack that followed, three of the 'General Lee' tanks supporting the West Yorks were damaged by Japanese 75-mm guns and the infantry was held up by automatic fire. But the next day the Japanese were found to have retreated from the position and the column advanced up to milestone 115. A patrol of Bren-gun carriers reached as far as Safarmaina, where it encountered another road-block and small-arms fire from the village. On 12 June, milestone 113 was reached. At the same time 3/9 Jat, which had replaced 3/2 Punjab at RK 335875 on 10 June, reached RK 3490. But the operations then slowed down due to heavy rain and stiffening Japanese opposition at milestone 112, and the next four days were spent in consolidating the gains. On 16 June, Headquarters 5th Indian Division moved up to RK 3085. By this time the 2nd British Divisions of the XXXIII Corps, advancing down the road from Kohima, had reached Mao near milestone 68. The strategic situation along the Kohima—Imphal road might be briefly recapitulated at this stage. It will be remembered that by the beginning of April 1944, the Japanese troops had occupied a long stretch of the road, roughly from Kanglatongbi to Kohima, thus cutting off the Imphal plain from India. To break this siege of Imphal and restore the road line of communication with Assam, Indian forces were set in motion from both ends. The XXXIII Corps advanced from Dimapur, as described in the Chapter that follows, charged with the task of retaking Kohima and then pushing on southwards along the road, till a junction was effected with the Imphal garrison. Simultaneously, the IV Corps in Imphal had ordered the 5th Indian Division to advance northwards along the road to meet the 2nd British Division and thus break the Japanese stronghold on Imphal. This advance of the 5th Indian Division involved the laborious process of clearing the Japanese from the hills that overlooked the road on either side, and then inching forward against their road-blocks on the road itself. The 2nd British Division was advancing swiftly, but the advance of the 5th Indian



Division had slowed down. On 13 June, two companies of 2 West Yorks of the 5th Indian Division with tank support had reached the demolished bridge at RK 331926. 3/9 Jat was co-operating with the West Yorks, advancing along the hills to the east of the road. By 16 June, the West Yorks crossed the repaired bridge at RK 331926 but were held up at RK 339634 near milestone 112. The next day, 17 June, operations began for the final link up with the 2nd British Division. The objective for this leap forward was milestone 105 and Point 5797 near it. Units were set apart for capturing the heights on either side and for advancing along the road itself. 3/9 Jat and 1/11 Sikh were to move through the hills to the east; 1/17 Dogra and 3/14 Punjab were to go along the hills to the west; and 2 West Yorks supported by tanks and armoured cars was to advance along the road. The units began their attacks accordingly. 3/9 Jat encountered a strong Japanese position at RK 340924, which it was able to capture only on 21 June, after severe fighting and air strikes by Allied planes. Behind it was 1/11 Sikh, probing into a Japanese position on Point 5417 near Thangal. In the hills to the west, 3/14 Punjab captured "Octopus Hill" at RK 336934 and 1/17 Dogra pushed on in order to descend to the road at milestone 109. On the main road, meanwhile, a mobile column was formed on 19 June to thrust north along the road and establish contact with the 2nd British Division moving down from Kohima. The column, known as "James Column", was constituted of one-half squadron of 3 Dragoon Guards, one-half squadron of 7 Cavalry, one Rifle Company of 2 West Yorks carried in 3-ton lorries, a number of carriers, a bulldozer and two Scissors bridges. The Japanese resistance started disintegrating rapidly and the James Column advanced till it reached a mine field and booby-traps at RK 340948, near milestone 111. On the morning of 22 June, 1/17 Dogra, which had moved through the hills west of the road and descended at milestone 109, established contact with the leading tanks of the 2nd British Division there. The road was cleared of the remnants of Japanese troops the same day and the first convoy came through to Imphal from Dimapur that evening.

¶The Japanese siege of Imphal was thereby finally broken.

#### AIR SUPPORT DURING THE STRUGGLE FOR IMPHAL

The role of air power in breaking the siege of Imphal may briefly be noticed here. It is no exaggeration to say that the victory which the IV Corps gained would have been impossible without the complete air superiority established and exploited by the Allied air forces in the theatre. This air superiority was first attained about the end of November 1943 with the arrival of



Spitfires in India. Within a few weeks of its arrival, this aircraft outpaced and shot down three successive "Dinah" type reconnaissance aircraft that the Japanese had sent out<sup>27</sup>. From November 1943 to January 1944, they destroyed 44 Japanese aircraft, claimed 13 as probably destroyed and 49 as damaged for the loss of only 7 of their number. In the first few months of 1944, long-range fighters of the United States Army Air Force, such as the Lightnings (P. 38) and Mustangs (P. 51), arrived in the theatre and further ensured Allied air superiority. They reached deep into Burma and attacked Japanese aircraft at their own base aerodromes. During March and April 1944, they destroyed or severely damaged over one hundred Japanese planes on the ground and another seventy-six in aerial combat. These were crippling losses, as the Japanese at this time were estimated to have only about 300 aircraft in Burma. During the great offensive, therefore, the Allied troops and transport planes were seldom harassed by the Japanese air force. Were it not for this immunity from air attack, the magnificent and vital performance of the Allied transport fleet would have been nipped in the bud.

Even as it was, the achievement involved considerable effort, as it was necessary not only to transport by air the 5th Indian Division to Imphal and the 7th Indian Division to Dimapur, but to maintain the entire IV Corps by air-supply. For almost three months, four divisions of troops and powerful airforce units had to be supplied with all their requirements, including food and ammunition, for waging a fight comprising innumerable battles. These demands were calculated at about 480 tons of supplies per day. To supply them, and to transport troops, only 76 Dakotas (C. 47) were available with the Troop Carrier Command, which was also called upon to supply the 3rd Indian Division in the heart of Central Burma, General Stilwell's troops in the Hukawng Valley and the 81st West African Division in the Kaladan Valley. In the middle of March 1944, therefore, the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia Command took over 20 Commando (C-46) planes from the American air fleet ferrying supplies to China over the "Hump".<sup>28</sup> The Combined Chiefs of Staff at Washington sanctioned this loan for one month only,<sup>29</sup> which was to expire about the middle of April 1944. By then, the move of the 5th Indian Division by air to Imphal

<sup>27</sup> "The Siege of Imphal" (air aspect), File No. 7398.

<sup>28</sup> 20 Commando planes could carry the same load as 30 Dakota planes.

<sup>29</sup> The air ferry to China was controlled by the American Chiefs of Staff through Lieut-General Stilwell as Commander of the (American) China-Burma-India theatre. Admiral Mountbatten had no specific authority to take these planes, but he acted under his own authority and was supported by the Chiefs of Staff later on. It will not be too much to say that in acting thus on his own responsibility and risking the censure of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, Lord Mountbatten saved his forces from a terrible disaster and made Japanese defeat in Burma virtually certain.



would be completed, but that of the 7th Indian Division to Dimapur would be still going on, and there were further tasks ahead—of maintaining the IV Corps at Imphal. So the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, requested the Combined Chiefs of Staff to allow him to retain the twenty Commando planes for some time more, and to provide seventy Dakotas more as reinforcements. But the Chiefs of Staff decided that the twenty Commando planes should be returned to their China-ferry duties immediately, while seventy-nine other transport aircraft were sent on loan to South-East Asia Command from the Mediterranean area.<sup>30</sup> These aircraft arrived early in April and began to operate immediately. They served to tide over the most critical days of April and May and kept the IV Corps in fighting trim. During these weeks, they could not supply in full the demands made on them, for bad weather hampered them and the airfields in Imphal were congested. There were only two all-weather airfields in the Imphal plain, one at Imphal and the other at Palel. The Palel aerodrome was within the range of Japanese guns, and the Japanese troops even infiltrated to the parked aircraft, destroying several of them in one night. But by dint of hard work and improvisation, the work was continued, although the IV Corps had to be put on reduced rations for several weeks. In June 1944, the volume of airborne supplies increased and reached the figure of 500 tons per day which was ample for all the needs of the troops in the plain. When the ground line of communication was finally reopened on 22 June, the air supplies had reached their peak and could maintain the garrison as long as required.

During the course of the siege, the Allied air forces delivered over 22,000 British tons of supplies to the IV Corps, and poured in over 20,000 combatant troops as reinforcements. Over 10,000 casualties and 35,000 "useless mouths" were evacuated from the plain.<sup>31</sup> This achievement was probably the most important single factor in defeating the Japanese offensive. If it had failed, even partially, Imphal might have fallen to the Japanese and the course of the war would have been different.

#### CONCLUSION

By the third week of June 1944, the struggle for Imphal was over. The Japanese bid to capture the strategic plain had failed.

<sup>30</sup> Mounbatten's *Report*.

<sup>31</sup> "The Siege of Imphal" *Op. cit.*

The 'useless mouths' were those non-combatants and others who were not immediately useful for the defence of Imphal and whose presence at Imphal required more rations to be brought by air into Imphal. Apart from the 35,000 sent back to India by air, 21,000 marched out to the Surma valley over the difficult mountain tracks leading westwards from Imphal.—Telegram No. 0-2028 dated 14 June 1944 from General Slim to General Giffard.



In the southern and south-eastern sectors, their frantic assault had been held up near Bishenpur and Tengnoupal respectively. Along the Litan road, the 20th Indian Division was advancing deep into the hills and was closing in upon Ukhrul. In the northern sector, the 5th Indian Division had cut through the Japanese steel ring around the plain and broken the siege by linking up with the XXXIII Corps troops.

The Japanese commander of the *Fifteenth Army* had gambled for high stakes, and had lost. He had banked on quick success and had hoped to maintain his forces in the inhospitable region by local supplies and captured dumps. But these hopes had been belied. His troops had indeed fought like heroes and covered themselves with glory. They had performed superhuman feats of tenacity and endurance and had proved yet again that Japanese troops could stand hardships and absorb losses which would have disintegrated any other army in the world.<sup>32</sup> But they had attacked prepared positions held by over 1,50,000 Allied troops with barely one-third of that strength.<sup>33</sup> They had run out of ammunition in the middle of the battles and had to conserve every round. Supplies of food and medicine were completely exhausted. Their plight was so desperate that when, early in May, a Japanese patrol attacked and temporarily drove out an Indian picquet in the Silchar track area, it snatched up the food stored in the position first and left the ammunition untouched.<sup>34</sup> Most of the troops, consequently, had to subsist on a diet of grass and bamboo shoots, augmented occasionally by their own pack animals. Their losses had been shattering. By the end of May 1944, about 9000 men had been killed, apart from casualties inflicted by Allied artillery fire, bombing, and by disease.<sup>35</sup> In the middle of April, a Japanese prisoner of war in the Litan road sector said that the total strength of three of the companies in his regiment was reduced to only 150 men, and *No. 10 Company of the 51st Regiment* had only ten men left in it.<sup>36</sup> In spite of it all, there were no cases of wholesale surrender even by small bodies of Japanese troops. They did not lose heart and kept hammering away at the stout defences till ordered to withdraw.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Their gallant opponent, Gen. Slim, has gone on record concerning the Japanese 33 Div. in particular: "Whatever one may think of the military wisdom of thus pursuing a hopeless object, there can be no question of the supreme courage and hardihood of the Japanese soldiers . . . I know of no army that could have equalled them." *Op. cit.*, p. 337.

<sup>33</sup> Appreciation of the situation by GOC IV Corps dated 30 April 1944.

<sup>34</sup> Operations, IV Corps.

<sup>35</sup> Special Corps Order dated 29 May 1944; File No. 8537.

<sup>36</sup> Operations IV Corps.

<sup>37</sup> Explaining their failure to capture Palel the Japanese said, after the war, that "owing to overconfidence by the troops (Japanese) engaged there, reinforcements were not demanded until too late." Burma Command Intelligence Summary No. 7.



This was magnificent, but it was not war. The Japanese commanders had bungled at the start ; they quarrelled at the end. The officers commanding the *31st* and *15th Divisions* asked for reinforcements and supplies of artillery ammunition from the Army Commander, and when this was not met, the *31st Division* retreated from Kohima at the end of May without orders from the Army Commander. Lieut.-General Mutaguchi, GOC-in-C, Japanese *Fifteenth Army*, became dissatisfied with the commanders of the *33rd Division* and the *51st Division* also. Consequently, the GOC *33rd Division* was replaced in May 1944 by Lieut.-General Tanaka, the GOC *31st Division* by Lieut.-General Tsuchida and the GOC *15th Division* by Lieut.-General Shibata in June 1944<sup>88</sup>. Such unprecedented wholesale replacements of all the divisional commanders in the midst of battle created widespread discouragement and dismay.

The Allied commanders, on the other hand, were fully vindicated in their strategy. Their plan of pulling back and defeating the Japanese attacks on the perimeter of Imphal plain had proved successful. It was essentially a battle of annihilation, in the sense that inflicting maximum casualties on the attackers was the main tactical objective throughout the struggle. This objective was kept steadily in mind by General Scoones, and he even held back the *1st Indian Infantry Brigade* from advancing towards Ukhrul in April, because it was easier to kill the Japanese near Litan than in the denser jungle further on.<sup>89</sup> The Imphal plain had been kept inviolate from the attackers, and devastating losses were inflicted upon the Japanese, which made it impossible for them to hold up the major Allied offensive that followed.

The Indian and British soldiers also had proved again their mettle in fierce combat. They had held and beaten back the desperate Japanese attacks on every sector and had inflicted far heavier casualties than they suffered. They showed that they had mastered the difficult art of jungle warfare, and, given suitable circumstances, could defeat the flower of the Imperial Japanese armies face to face in the field. They had stood firm on every sector and had pierced through the Japanese defences in the north to join hands once again with the XXXIII Corps which had liberated Kohima and was marching down to meet them.

<sup>88</sup> SEATIC Bulletin No. 240. The GOC of *15th Division* was replaced after his death by illness.

<sup>89</sup> DO Letter dated 24 April 1944, from General Scoones to General Slim.



## CHAPTER XIV

# The Siege and Relief of Kohima

The siege of Imphal by the Japanese *33rd Division* and *15th Division* has already been described. It may be recalled that, concurrently with the attack on Imphal by these two Japanese divisions, Ukhrul, Jessami and Kharasom also had been attacked and captured by the Japanese *31st Division*. As described in Chapter XI preceding, by the beginning of April Kohima and Dimapur too were threatened by the Japanese 'northern column'; and the cutting of the Dimapur—Imphal road at Kohima formed an integral part of the overall Japanese plan. It has also been mentioned that the Allied commanders had formed a fairly accurate estimate of Japanese intentions and had already formulated a broad plan for defeating them. But in one detail the Allied appreciation was wide of the mark, namely, in underestimating the strength of the northern Japanese thrust aimed against Kohima and the Imphal road. However, General Giffard and General Slim quickly revised their estimates and took swift measures as soon as the real strength of the Japanese thrust was revealed by the fall of Ukhrul, Jessami and Kharasom. After the necessary consultations and briefing, Headquarters XXXIII Corps moved to Jorhat on 3 April 1944, and by 6 April the move was completed.

Of the fighting units, the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade of the 5th Indian Division completed its flight from the Arakan front to Dimapur on 26 March 1944. Next to arrive was the 5th Infantry Brigade of the 2nd British Division, which was flown to Dimapur from Southern India, reaching there on 4 April. It was followed by the 4th and the 6th Infantry Brigades in the second week of April.

The 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade was despatched from Arakan and reached Hautley Camp near Dimapur between 7 April and 16 April. In the meantime, the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade of specially trained jungle assault troops was moved from its training area near Saugor to Mariani near Jorhat, reaching there by 9 April. Further reinforcements kept arriving in the XXXIII Corps area in the following months, and the 268th Indian Lorried Brigade concentrated near Dimapur by 8 May, with the task of protecting the Assam Railway. By 20 May, Headquarters 7th Indian Division and 114th Indian Infantry Brigade had reached Dimapur from Arakan, and on 24 May the 33rd and the 161st Indian Infantry



Brigades were placed under command of the 7th Indian Division, which was brought up to its full normal strength. By June 1944, the strength of the Corps was seven infantry brigades organised under the 2nd British Division and the 7th Indian Division and a large number of miscellaneous units under the 21st Indian Division, apart from the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade advancing towards Ukhrul from the Jorhat area.<sup>1</sup>

#### ALLIED PLANS<sup>2</sup>

General Slim had assigned to Lieut.-General Stopford three tasks for the XXXIII Corps:

- (a) immediate task: to prevent Japanese infiltration or penetration into the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys, or through the Lushai Hills;
- (b) to keep open the main Dimapur—Kohima—Imphal road, which was the line of communication of the IV Corps; and
- (c) to be prepared to move to the assistance of the IV Corps and to help in any possible way to destroy the Japanese west of the Chindwin.

Lieut.-General Stopford judged that infiltration or penetration into an area as extensive as the Brahmaputra Valley might not be prevented, but vital installations in this area must be defended. These installations in order of importance were:

- (a) the main base at Dimapur;
- (b) the all-weather airfields at Golaghat, Dergaon and Jorhat;
- (c) the main line railway through Dimapur; and
- (d) the oil installations at Digboi.

It was possible to ensure the defence of the Dimapur base and to observe and subsequently deal with hostile penetration against the airfields, oilfields or the railway line. Penetration into the Surma Valley or through the Lushai Hills appeared unlikely and was regarded as entirely secondary to the above task. Regarding the Dimapur—Imphal road, it was impossible to guarantee it against Japanese penetration throughout its whole length. Task (c) therefore, might only be regarded as an ultimate task and its accomplishment depended upon the provision of a concentrated mobile reserve after the threat to Dimapur and the railway had been eliminated. Lieut.-General Stopford based his strategy on the following appreciation:

- (a) that the Japanese were almost certain to attack Imphal in strength probably from the north-east and north;

<sup>1</sup> Order of Battle, XXXIII Corps, June 1944.

<sup>2</sup> "The Siege and Relief of Kohima", File No. 11085.



- (b) that either before or in conjunction with an attack on Imphal, they would cut the road Dimapur—Kohima—Imphal with a view to isolating Imphal from any reserves which the Allies might have in the north ;
- (c) that should Japanese forces capture Kohima, they would probably attack Dimapur from the south-east ;
- (d) that no ground should be considered to be impassable for the Japanese. They could always by-pass any defended locality but they were likely to fight for main road and tracks which were essential for their own maintenance.

The forces available for the XXXIII Corps in the beginning were the Lushai Brigade and the troops under the 202nd Line of Communication Area. Except for the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade, 1st Burma Regiment and the garrison of Kohima, which were concentrated in an operational role, the troops of the 202nd Line of Communication Area were too dispersed and immobile to be of use in other than local defence duties and local counter-attacks.

The forces in the Lushai Hills were adequate to observe and delay any hostile penetration into that area, which was considered fairly safe from Japanese incursions till about the end of April. However, nothing was to be taken from the Lushai Brigade to reinforce another portion of the front. The area was about four days' journey by road from Dimapur, and so it was considered best to leave it as a self-contained sector under the Lushai Brigade.

The sector to the west of the Silchar valley, i.e., between the Lushai Hills and the main Dimapur sector, was to be defended by the Mahendra Dal Regiment supported by a company of 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, operating under the command of 257th Sub-area. The Mahendra Dal was ordered to hold up for delay, Japanese columns trying to advance westward along the Bishenpur—Silchar track or other hill paths between the Imphal plain and the Silchar valley.

North of this sector lay the main Dimapur—Kohima area. The defence of Dimapur was vital for the success of the XXXIII Corps operations, and Lieut.-General Stopford made it his first concern. Before the end of March, when the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was the only major formation available in the area, this brigade was placed at the Nichuguard defile to shield Dimapur from the south-west. Even Kohima was thus left exposed to the Japanese attack. But the defence of Dimapur was rightly considered far more important than that of Kohima, for, if Dimapur fell to the Japanese, even the build-up of the XXXIII Corps would be difficult. The newly arriving brigades of the 2nd British Division and the 7th Indian Division would then be forced to detrain at a distance and would have to recapture Dimapur without having



space for the proper deployment of their supporting arms. The Japanese, on the other hand, would capture immense stores of all kinds at Dimapur, thus easing the burden on their long and difficult lines of communication. Bearing in mind these considerations, Lieut.-General Stopford first consolidated his hold on Dimapur and made adequate preparations, as more units of the 2nd British Division arrived, for preventing any infiltration by Japanese columns against the road and railway north and south of Dimapur. It was only after his Dimapur base had been securely held by the units of the 2nd British Division that he began a systematic advance for the relief of the besieged garrison in Kohima.<sup>3</sup>

For dealing with Japanese infiltrations further north against the road and railway that served as the line of communication of General Stilwell's Chinese and American forces in the Hukawng Valley, the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade was ordered to operate in two columns from Golaghat and Mariani towards Kohima and Mokochung. These columns were not only to secure the Allied line of communications along the Brahmaputra valley but also threaten, later on, the Japanese line of communications passing through Jessami and Ukhrul.

#### JAPANESE PLAN FOR THE CAPTURE OF KOHIMA

As has been mentioned earlier, the Japanese *31st Division* was allotted the task of occupying Kohima in order to cut off the retreat line of the Allied troops in the Imphal Plain. To recapitulate, the Japanese *31st Division* crossed the river Chindwin on 15 March in two columns which were to fan out and later converge on Kohima. On the right was *138th Regiment* moving towards Kohima via Bombal—Kuki—Jessami with orders "to fall on Kohima and annihilate the enemy on that front". This regiment reached Kuki without incident on 21 March, but thereafter it met with opposition. It fought a stiff action with the elements of "V" Force on 25 March, at Kanjang Kuki, which however did not stop its march towards Kohima. Between 26 March and 1 April, it overcame opposition offered by the elements of the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade and 1st Assam Regiment in Jessami and Kharasom area. Outskirts of Kohima were reached on 4 April.

On the left of the Japanese forces moving from the Chindwin was the *58th Regiment*. Its plan of action was to travel to Ukhrul, destroy opposition there and along the road and then attack towards Mao Songsang, cut the Imphal—Kohima road and then turn north to join the *138th Regiment* in the battle of Kohima. It performed

<sup>3</sup>Operations of XXXIII Corps, File No. 3694.



these tasks after overcoming the 50th Parachute Brigade at Sangshak and captured Tuphema on 2 April and entered Mao Songsang the next day. It was now possible for it to make its attack on Kohima from the south while the 138th Regiment attacked from the north and east. This left hand column was known as *Miyazaki Tai* and consisted of the Headquarters 31st Divisional Infantry Group, 58th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Battalion 31st Mountain Artillery Regiment, one company 31st Engineer Regiment and medical personnel. The *Miyazaki Tai* was commanded by Major-General Miyazaki, commander of the 31st Divisional Infantry Group.

A reconnaissance of the Allied positions around Kohima was immediately carried out by the *Miyazaki Tai* and a plan of attack was promptly decided upon. One Company of 58th Infantry Regiment with two mortars and two medium machine-guns was to hold Tuphema and guard the road coming from Imphal. The 1st Battalion 58th Infantry Regiment, less one company, was to advance to the west of Kohima via Maram and cut the Kohima—Dimapur road, thus preventing further Allied reinforcements reaching the Kohima garrison. The right column consisting of the 3rd Battalion 58th Infantry Regiment and one company of mountain artillery was to advance to Kohima via Mao Songsang and Kekrima, while the left column comprising the rest of the force was to advance to Kohima along the main road from Imphal. It was anticipated that if the *Miyazaki Tai* launched its attack at once without waiting for the arrival of the rest of the 31st Division it would be able to occupy Kohima without difficulty. This bold plan was approved by the commander of the 31st Division, whereupon the troops started to move forward on 4 April. The *Miyazaki Tai* entered Kohima on 6 April and began its historic siege which was to last for several weeks. The main body of the Japanese 31st Division reached a position east of Kohima on 7 April. The 138th Infantry Regiment and the major portion of the 31st Mountain Artillery Regiment then moved round to the north of Kohima and descended to cut the road from Kohima to Dimapur. One company of the 12th Infantry Regiment was sent to Rangazumi to guard the right flank of the 31st Division against attack from the north. The remainder of the 12th Infantry Regiment was concentrated in the area east of Kohima as a central reserve. Headquarters 31st Division was located about nine miles east of Kohima, at Khanjang.

#### THE TOPOGRAPHY AND DEFENCE SCHEME OF KOHIMA

Topographically, the Kohima—Dimapur area formed part of the Naga Hills. Dimapur lay on the low plain of the Brahmaputra



Major-General D. T. Cowan  
Commander 17th Indian Division



Major-General D. D. Gracey  
Commander 20th Indian Division





Major-General H. R. Briggs  
Commander 5th Indian Division



Major-General Frank Messervy  
Commander 7th Indian Division



valley, of which dense tropical forests and tall 'elephant grass' were the main features. The Kohima road ran south for about ten miles from Dimapur before entering the narrow gorge of the Jharnapani stream. Climbing up the gorge, which was known as the Nichuguard defile, the road reached a plateau over a thousand feet in altitude. About twelve miles west along the road lay Baghpani, where higher hills began and the road climbed up to about 4000 feet. Priphema was then reached, situated 28 miles from Dimapur. From Priphema the road ran about eight miles east to Zubza lying at the same altitude. Kohima lay south-east of Zubza stream. Across the stream lay another high spur which carried a good track from Kohima to Merema, and Cheswema. Since this spur was occupied by the Japanese, the Allied advance from Zubza onwards was always open to a flank attack across the Zubza stream. Moreover, beyond Zubza the Kohima road had to climb tortuously up a valley to a saddle 5000 feet high called Kohima Ridge, which lay across it like a dam. Climbing up, the road ran along the top of the ridge, passing through Kohima town. Beyond, it bent away again to resume its southward course to Imphal. From Kohima a jeep track ran east to Jessami, whence a hill track led to the Chindwin. A second and indifferent road ran back towards the Assam plain via Merema, as already described. Kohima was, therefore, a road junction of importance, which, combined with the commanding hills across and on both sides of the road, made it of vital concern to both the sides.

An aerial view of the Ridge would look like the outline of a hunting saddle when it is on its saddle rock. The pommel is to the left, and the cantle to the right. From pommel to cantle is 1000 yards, and the depth through the flap 500 yards. On all sides, except at the ends, the ground fell steeply away, but from these two ends ridges ran off to right and left, which later rose into high hills 2000 yards off; these overlooked the position from both sides. On the pommel was the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow; in the cantle area were the Detail Issue Store and Field Supply Depot. The road from Imphal ran along the seat of the saddle from right to left, curved round the pommel and stretched away to the rear to Jotsoma and Dimapur. It formed a natural defence line for over half the perimeter; being on the side of a steep hill, it had a cutting on the garrison side, varying from ten to fifty feet in height. There were, however, two obvious lines of approach along the two ridges at either end, and it was from these two ends that the attackers tried to press forward.

Kohima garrison was holding a strong position in the highest part of the town. It commanded an excellent view of the entire surrounding area, but it was itself overlooked by higher ranges on all



sides. It was, as a result, a vulnerable target to mortar or artillery fire.

The defence of Kohima was planned on the basis of defended localities sited for all-round field of fire. Early in March, when the Japanese offensive was imminent, the local defence scheme was modified so as to form "boxes". Four boxes were formed in and around Kohima: Box B (MS 44), Box C (Kohima), Box D (24 Rft Camp), Box E (MS 49).<sup>4</sup> On Monday, 20 March, Box C was closed and defensive positions were taken up in Kohima. The positions previously held by Shere Regiment at Jessami and Kharasom had been taken over by the 1st Assam Regiment, but these were not under the command of the Officer Commanding, Kohima.

On Thursday, 23 March, Colonel H. U. Richards, C.B.E., arrived in Kohima and took over the duties of Commander of Kohima Garrison, which included responsibility for the area Jessami—Kharasom—Kohima. His headquarters was located in the bungalow of the Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills. He was placed in operational control of all the troops in Kohima and of the 1st Assam Regiment, being responsible direct to the Headquarters IV Corps at Imphal. After the road was cut at the end of March, Colonel Richards came under the command of 202nd Lines of Communication Area and finally of the XXXIII Corps on its formation.

Col. Richards got the hospital patients and non-combatants evacuated from Kohima and issued rifles to about 500 men in the Convalescent Depot. With other men hastily taken from administrative units etc., he made out a mixed garrison of about 1000 men. This non-descript force prepared to hold Kohima against the Japanese.<sup>5</sup>

#### THE SIEGE OF KOHIMA

The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade completed its journey by air to Dimapur on 26 March 1944. The next day it was on its way to Kohima to reinforce the local garrison. But almost immediately afterwards, Lieut.-General Stopford realised that, at the moment, the forces available to him were quite inadequate for holding both Kohima and Dimapur. At Dimapur Base Area were about 45000 men, but hardly 500 of them could use a rifle. The latter was obviously of far greater importance, for if it fell to the attackers the Assam Railway would be cut and even the deployment of the XXXIII Corps would become difficult. So he decided to make certain of the defence of Dimapur. The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade had already moved back on 30 March from Kohima to the Nichuguard defile, 8 miles south-east of Dimapur under the orders of Major-General

<sup>4</sup> War Diary of Kohima Garrison.

<sup>5</sup> Slim: *Defeat into Victory*, p. 308.



Ranking, G. O. C., 202nd L of C Area. As events turned out, this proved a mistake.<sup>6</sup>

On 28 March, the Japanese attacked Jessami and Kharasom held by the units of the 1st Assam Regiment. The attacks were beaten off, but the defenders were hard pressed and it was decided to send forward the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade again to assist them to break off from the Japanese and withdraw in good order. The brigade, accordingly, reached Kohima again on 29 March. But the same day, information was received that the forces advancing towards Kohima comprised a whole Japanese division, and not merely three or four battalions as expected. The Assam Regiment was then told to withdraw unassisted, and, on 31 March, the brigade was ordered to return to Dimapur immediately. Boxes B, D and E, at Kohima were evacuated the same day, the troops from Box D being brought into the main Kohima garrison. The road-block set up south of Box E as a protective measure was still maintained, but preparations to meet the imminent danger were not smoothly carried out. The personnel of Headquarters XXXIII Corps, which had not worked as a team under operational conditions before, experienced the usual difficulties before settling down.<sup>7</sup> In Kohima, many units were moved without reference to Garrison Headquarters, so that the strength of the troops available for defence was always fluctuating. These minor difficulties were overcome within a few days when operations got into swing.

In the midst of these hurried preparations for defence, Nagas reported on Tuesday, 4 April, that a Japanese column of about one battalion was marching on Kohima from Mao Songsang. The Garrison Headquarters moved into battle positions at 1700 hours. The same day, on the arrival of the 5th Brigade (2nd Division) at Dimapur, the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered back to Kohima. Early next morning, 4 Royal West Kent, with the 20th Indian Mountain Battery of the 24th Indian Mountain Regiment and a detachment of Field Ambulance, left for Kohima, reaching there late in the afternoon. However, before the day was out, the Japanese had attacked Kohima from the south, east and north, and the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was too late to prevent the hostile forces from occupying the Naga village to the north and the high ground to the south of the garrison. Nevertheless, the Royal West Kents hurriedly occupied their positions on Garrison Hill and Hospital Spur. About 200 men of the Assam Regiment held Picquet Hill, the rest having made for Dimapur after disengaging near Jessami. The Indian Mountain Battery was unable to take up a suitable fire position, it being overlooked from all sides.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 310.

<sup>7</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps, *op. cit.*



The rest of the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade could not join the British battalion<sup>a</sup> at Kohima on 6 April as a Japanese force was already astride the main road, west of the town. Consequently, the brigade (less 4 Royal West Kent) formed a defensive box at mile-stone 42½ on the road Kohima-Dimapur. A Company of 4/7 Rajput, which had been sent to contact the Kohima Garrison, had to remain with the Garrison as the road behind it had been cut.

Then began the historic siege of Kohima. The Japanese had the double advantage of superior numbers and tactically well sited positions on the high ground north and south of the Garrison. The siege lasted for about 15 days, and these 15 days were crowded with stories of unflinching courage and indomitable resistance on the part of men who held their ground against such heavy odds.

By 6 April, the Japanese had completely closed the net around Kohima. In the course of the siege the garrison of 3500 men obtained very little sleep for at least eleven days. The Japanese carried out a fierce artillery barrage by guns and mortars every day at dusk, so the balmy summer evenings of lingering twilight came to be known by the Kohima garrison as the "hate period". At night, wave after wave of Japanese infantry hurled itself against the garrison. Indian National Army troops were used to shout across the forward lines, inviting the Indian troops to go over to the Japanese and fight for the liberation of India with them, but without any impression on the garrison. An element of humour was introduced into the grim business of war when on several occasions these appeals were made to Indian troops in English and to British troops in Urdu.<sup>b</sup>

The Japanese were well dug in, and from their vantage points on the higher ground kept both the relieving columns and the garrison under harassing fire. Frontal attacks were also launched and were repelled only after ferocious fighting in which Indian sappers blasted the Japanese out of the huts they had occupied. Some of the intruders on one occasion hid in a brick oven and were not forced out until troops smashed open the iron doors and lobbed in grenades.

On 5 April, the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow sector was heavily mortared and shelled by Japanese infantry guns. But no attack developed there. However, a Japanese attack on General Purpose Transport Ridge resulted in the withdrawal of the centre company and the occupation by the Japanese of the whole sector, except the eastern end of the ridge which was held by a composite company of Gurkhas, who were withdrawn after nightfall when a company of Burma Regiment from the western end of the Ridge

<sup>a</sup> 4 Royal West Kent.

<sup>b</sup> War Diary of Kohima Garrison for 7 April 1944.



also withdrew. This Japanese success unfortunately resulted in some demoralization to these troops, many of whom made for Dimapur instead of returning to their box.<sup>10</sup> By the capture of GPT Ridge the control of the pipeline supplying water to the garrison was also acquired by the Japanese. Immediately afterwards, the Japanese attacked Jail Hill and one bay of the petrol dump was set alight. The same day, vehicles parked on the main road south of the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow were set on fire by Japanese mortars. However, the attack on Jail Hill was repulsed, and in the evening it was decided that the Treasury should be reoccupied and a company of Shere Regiment was sent to attack it. But the Japanese were in considerable strength and the attack failed, though four sections remained in position near the Treasury all night. During the night one section of guns was moved to Summerhouse Hill. It was on this day that 4 Royal West Kent with one section of Bombay Sappers and Miners and one mountain battery joined the garrison.

On 6 April, the Japanese main force was to the south and east with the general tendency to move east and north on to the Bokajan road. Their strength in the immediate vicinity of Kohima had by then increased to two battalions and they had succeeded in establishing themselves in the Naga village to the north-east of the town. On the 6th morning, the Treasury was occupied by one company of Shere Regiment. But Jail Hill was repeatedly attacked by the Japanese. The feature was defended gallantly, but had in the end to be evacuated due to intense and accurate mortar fire. During the night of 6/7 April, some Japanese infiltrated into bashas between the Field Supply Depot and Detail Issue Store, but they were annihilated by a counter-attack by the Royal West Kents, 44 Japanese bodies being counted in this area. In any case, no one could have got away with supplies from the Field Supply Depot, because it was on fire.

By this time the supplies were falling short; hence the Allied air forces were called upon to fly in the requirements. Day by day they flew over the shrinking target area to drop their loads through a storm of shells and bullets. Water was an acute need. The only water-supply for the garrison lay within 30 yards of the Japanese lines and men had to crawl towards it singly, fill up their containers and make their way back up the bare slope, dodging the snipers' fire as best they could. The ration was a pint per man per day. For the next fortnight the garrison had no respite, and never more than a couple of hours' sleep on end. The wounded were piling up and the resources for handling them were woefully short. To remedy this, organised raids were made behind the Japanese lines. Priceless

<sup>10</sup> War Diary of Kohima Garrison,



medical stores were in this way filched from a ruined hospital already in Japanese hands.

7 April opened as usual with the "morning hate" which generally took place between the hours 0500 to 0730, and consisted of heavy fire from mortars and infantry guns. Later in the day, the 1st Assam Regiment evacuated the positions in the Hospital area and took up positions on Summerhouse Hill facing south. They suffered many casualties on the southern face of the perimeter from a Japanese infantry gun which fired at point-blank range. Japanese snipers had meanwhile positioned themselves on the ridge opposite the Hospital area so that they could cover the water-point.

On 8 April, identification of prisoners showed the following dispositions of the Japanese 58th Regiment : one battalion in Kohima village, one battalion on Jail Hill and GPT area, with one battalion in reserve at Mao. The Japanese supply base was reported to be at Ukhrul with *Headquarters 31st Division* at Khanjang. On this day also Japanese attacks on Field Supply Depot continued, but the privations due to shortage of supplies were partially relieved when in the afternoon cargo planes dropped ammunition and water by parachute, while Hurricanes of the Royal Air Force bombed Japanese positions in Kohima village and on the Merema Ridge.

On the morning of 9 April the Japanese again developed an attack on the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow and were successful in effecting penetration up to the bungalow, capturing a section of guns which, fortunately, had been put out of action. Another gun and mortar concentration was laid on the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow in the evening, but was not followed by any infantry attack.

On 10 April, the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow sector was taken over by a company of 4 Royal West Kent. Air-supply continued morning and evening, as did the bombing and strafing by Royal Air Force Hurricanes. Headquarters 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was also reported to be near milestone 41 and hopes of speedy relief had revived. A Japanese force estimated at 2,000 was, however, reported in the area Khonoma—Pulomi, of whom about half were digging in at Pulomi. In Kohima it was decided that the DIS area was no longer tenable as it was completely dominated by Jail Hill, and the position was evacuated after dark.

On the morning of 11 April, the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade from Manipur gained contact with the Japanese as its tanks encountered fire from a 75-mm gun. But for the Kohima Garrison it was a quiet day, while on the next some local gains had been made and a small Japanese attack on Field Supply Depot was repulsed by two platoons of 4/7 Rajput. Nevertheless, the situation as regards wounded and water was becoming critical, which was aggravated by



heavy shelling and mortaring of the defended positions on 13 April. Although this was not followed up by attack, Japanese snipers and light machine-guns moved forward and gave the garrison considerable trouble, as they were firing on fixed lines. The air-dropping of ammunition and water in the evening was only partially successful and many parachutes fell to the Japanese. The reason probably was that too many parachutes were dropped in one run, the pilots naturally being anxious to get away from the area as soon as possible. One flight in particular gave a complete drop of 3" mortar ammunition to the Japanese of which they made full use in captured mortars.<sup>11</sup> A new source of water supply was discovered from a pipe fed by a spring on the main road north-west of the Box. The new water-point relieved distress for the garrison, though part of the route was exposed and drawing could only be done at night. The day's operations closed with a night move by a company of the West Kents to Field Supply Depot to check Japanese infiltration. The garrison's morale was also raised by the issue of a Special Order of the Day by the Garrison Commander exhorting his tired men in stirring words to stand fast and defend Kohima till help arrived.<sup>12</sup>

The next day again saw intense shelling and mortar fire. Japanese snipers had crept closer still and introduced a new element of horror in the situation. The garrison's G.S.O. III was killed by a sniper in front of Battle Headquarters. Air-dropping at 1000 hours was more accurate than on the previous day; but hessian ropes of parachutes broke in many instances and loads fell dangerously fast. By 15 April, the garrison at Kohima had been forced into a tiny area. The men lay always under the fire of the batteries on the slopes above the town. The fighting had mounted in ferocity and shelling rose to a new crescendo, for the Japanese resorted to shelling by day, and using their infantry for night assaults only.

Sniper and light machine-gun activity continued the next morning also, but in the evening and throughout the night the Japanese shelled the garrison positions causing many casualties including several among the wounded. A direct hit on the Medical Inspection Room killed two medical officers, and seriously wounded a third. On 17 April, Japanese pressure and infiltration had continued in both the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow and Field Supply Depot areas. In the former, however, local thrusts by Assam Regiment and Assam Rifles had restored the situation. In the FSD sector the tired condition of the Royal West Kents and the heavy casualties they had suffered made it imperative that they should be relieved. The only troops available were two platoons of the Assam Rifles and one of the Assam Regiment. These were equally tired but had not

<sup>11</sup> War Diary of Kohima Garrison.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix. 5.



been shelled to the same extent ; so they replaced the Royal West Kents. After this relief, the Japanese kept up their attacks. They overran parts of the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow position several times, but every time the Indian troops, counter-attacking with noteworthy dash and gallantry, threw them out again. After nightfall pressure increased still further and finally the defenders were forced to vacate their positions. Meanwhile, reports were received that the Japanese were concentrating for an attack on Kuki Picquet. But in that black hour there were no troops in the garrison in any fit condition to counter-attack. Colonel Richards, the Garrison Commander, was forced to watch helplessly as the Japanese attack on Kuki Picquet developed. It started at 0230 hours during the night of 17/18 April and by 0300 hours the feature was in their hands. The Japanese then opened very heavy fire on Summerhouse. Another attack was imminent, but the commander had no means to prevent it. The whole defence of Kohima was about to crumble. It all seemed over, and the brave garrison waited with their hearts in their mouths. But the Japanese knew not how near they were to success. The minutes lengthened into hours and the night wore off, but the final vicious assault did not come. With the first faint glimmer of dawn, a ray of hope was born in the battle-weary garrison again. A new day, Tuesday 18 April, was coming, and with it came help at last.

As related below, the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade had been holding positions at Jotsoma, only about 4 miles from Kohima all these days, and had linked up with the 2nd British Division advancing from Dimapur on 15 April. By the morning of 18 April, it was finally ready to break the Japanese siege of Kohima. At 0830 hours that day, the brigade opened its attack and after heavy shelling, 1/1 Punjab, less two companies, and a detachment of tanks made contact with the garrison. 1/1 Punjab moved a platoon of A Company from Jotsoma Box to high ground on Terrace Hill without opposition. The rest of the company moved in to reinforce, thus securing the right flank of Picquet Hill. B Company moved to Picquet Hill, and C Company took up positions on Bald Spur to prevent Japanese attacks on road from high ground to the right ; another platoon occupied Hospital Ridge overlooking the road to protect the tanks which took up positions commanding the road at Morgue. B Company also moved up the Hospital Ridge and took up positions to cover the evacuation of the wounded, who had been besieged for 13 days and numbered over 300. Moreover, there were over 2000 semi-trained and semi-combatant troops for evacuation. On completion of the evacuation, B Company took over from the Royal West Kents their positions facing Kuki Picquet. D Company, meanwhile, had entered the garrison, and it took up the



defence of the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow. A Company had also moved from Terrace Hill on to Picquet Hill in relief of D Company. Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company established themselves on Summerhouse Hill with C Company on their north flank.<sup>13</sup>

A strange scene greeted the liberators as they marched into Kohima. The once neat little town was changed beyond recognition. Not a building was left undamaged. Most of them were reduced to a heap of rubble, while the rest had walls pitted with bullets or torn down by shells. The trees stood gaunt and bare, with many of their branches carried off by the bombardment. Many had lost their foliage by bombs, but were festooned with white parachutes in a silent testimony to the magnificent work of the supply-dropping aircraft. These unarmed planes had braved the Japanese guns and had carried ammunition, medicines and even water to the hard pressed garrison. The violent monsoon had come to add new perils to their job, hiding jagged cliffs behind the soft vapours of the cloud. The intrepid pilots then dropped waterproof sheets to their comrades below, so that they might catch and store up some of the rainfall. And finally, the liberators saw little groups of grimy and bearded riflemen standing at the mouths of their bunkers and staring with blood-shot, sleep-starved eyes as the relieving troops came in. They had not had a wash for weeks. With the boom of the guns and the screech of shells always in their ears, they had fought and lived in their trenches for almost a fortnight. For rest they had thrown themselves on the ground with their boots on, ready to fight at a moment's notice. Casualties had been grievously heavy, 4 Royal West Kent, for example, having only 250 men left when it marched out of Kohima. The wounded were forced to lie in the midst of the battle while the doctors carried out primitive surgery and shells landed all around them. All that was over now. Though the tired garrison was not evacuated to Dimapur till two days later, they knew that the worst was over and they were saved. It was on 20 April that Royal Berkshire of the 6th British Infantry Brigade entered Kohima and relieved the garrison at their posts. Colonel Richards, the commander of the indomitable defenders of Kohima, handed over his responsibilities at 0600 hours that day to the Officer Commanding 1/1 Punjab and the whole garrison moved down via the Hospital Spur and the main road by mechanical transport to Dimapur.

#### THE APPROACH MARCH TO KOHIMA

Thus was Kohima defended and finally relieved. It is now necessary to go back to the beginning of April in order to follow

<sup>13</sup> "The Siege and Relief of Kohima", *op. cit.*



the fortunes of the 2nd British Division and the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade in their bitterly contested advance, leading to the relief of Kohima on 20 April.

As related earlier, 4 Royal West Kent of the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was sent to reinforce Kohima on 5 April. To further fortify the position there the brigade was also ordered to join 4 Royal West Kent on 6 April, as by that time the units of the 5th British Infantry Brigade had started moving into Dimapur. The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade advanced, but it was held up by a Japanese road-block at Punjab Ridge. Hence, unable to reach Kohima, it occupied positions around Jotsoma. Behind it, the Nichuguard area was held by the 1st Burma Regiment, while 2 Dorset of the 5th British Brigade moved into the area Dimapur-Jamuguri to protect the railway line.

To chalk out the plan of the coming operations, the XXXIII Corps Commander held a conference on 9 April. By that date the Japanese had surrounded the Kohima Garrison and the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade at Jotsoma, and had established a road-block at milestone 32 between the latter place and Dimapur. The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was thus cut off. In the conference it was decided that:

- (1) The 2nd British Division should be given operational control of all the troops east of Dimapur.
- (2) The immediate task of this division should be to open the road to Kohima, clear the surrounding hills of the Japanese troops and secure it as a firm base for further offensive operations.
- (3) The commander of the 202nd Lines of Communication Area was to be responsible for protecting the railway and was allotted the 23rd Brigade and 11 Cavalry for this purpose. To facilitate this task, Headquarters 202nd Line of Communications Area was moved from Dimapur to Jorhat.

Movements in accordance with these decisions started on 10 April. By this time the troops under the XXXIII Corps had got badly dispersed. The garrison of Kohima and 4 Royal West Kent were besieged in Kohima. About four miles to the west of them lay the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade at Jotsoma, which also was surrounded by the Japanese on all sides. Behind the brigade the Dimapur Road had been cut at milestone 32 thus preventing any succour to the besieged brigade.

The first task therefore was to re-establish contact with 161st Indian Infantry Brigade at Jotsoma. By 10 April, battalions of the 4th British Brigade and the 6th British Brigade and some artillery units had started arriving at Dimapur. Commander of the 6th



Brigade was given the responsibility for the defence of Dimapur and the Nichuguard defile. The 5th Brigade was ordered to advance and reopen communications with the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade. Units of the 4th British Brigade were sent forward as they arrived behind the 5th Brigade to protect the road from Nichuguard defile to the 5th Brigade's area.

On 11 April, the 5th Brigade attacked and broke through the Japanese road-block at milestone 32. The 4th Brigade immediately stepped up along the road behind the forward troops to secure their line of communication with Dimapur. On 13 April, 7 WORC R launched an attack against the two Japanese road-blocks at milestone 38. The attack was repulsed by the Japanese but they suffered heavy casualties in doing so. Tactical Headquarters, 2nd British Division and Headquarters 4th Brigade with 2 Norfolk and supporting arms were established at milestone 28 near Phipema and 1/8 LF was positioned at Ghaspani near milestone 18. On 14 April, another attack was begun on the road-block at milestone 38. A very heavy artillery bombardment was put down, each gun of divisional artillery firing 160 rounds. The effect of this shattering bombardment was very gratifying. The Japanese bunkers were pulverised and their roofs were caved in, burying the defenders in the rubble. 1 Cameron led by tanks moved up immediately afterwards and easily broke through the Japanese defences. The Japanese had suffered severe losses by the artillery fire and those still alive appeared dazed as a result of the terrific shelling. But on that very day other Japanese troops between milestones 38 and 39 tried to overrun Headquarters 5th Brigade located near Zubza. However, these minor attacks were easily beaten back. At the same time several other minor engagements had taken place between milestones 38 and 39, as a result of which this stretch of road was mopped up and cleared of the Japanese. It was estimated that the Japanese lost about 200 men killed in these engagements, of which 60 were accounted for during the attack by 1 Cameron on the road-block at milestone 38. But the relieving troops were faced with yet another Japanese road-block at milestone 40. On 15 April, the 5th Brigade attacked this position and surged forward killing over 80 Japanese. On the same day contact was re-established at milestone 40 with the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade which had been advancing westwards from Jotsoma.

The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade had been fighting almost daily since its being cut off at Jotsoma on 6 April. On 7 April the brigade witnessed mounting Japanese attacks against Kohima without being able to do anything to help the garrison. The telephone line from Jotsoma to Dimapur was cut that day in the area of milestone 38 but was repaired by a party of signalmen during the night. On

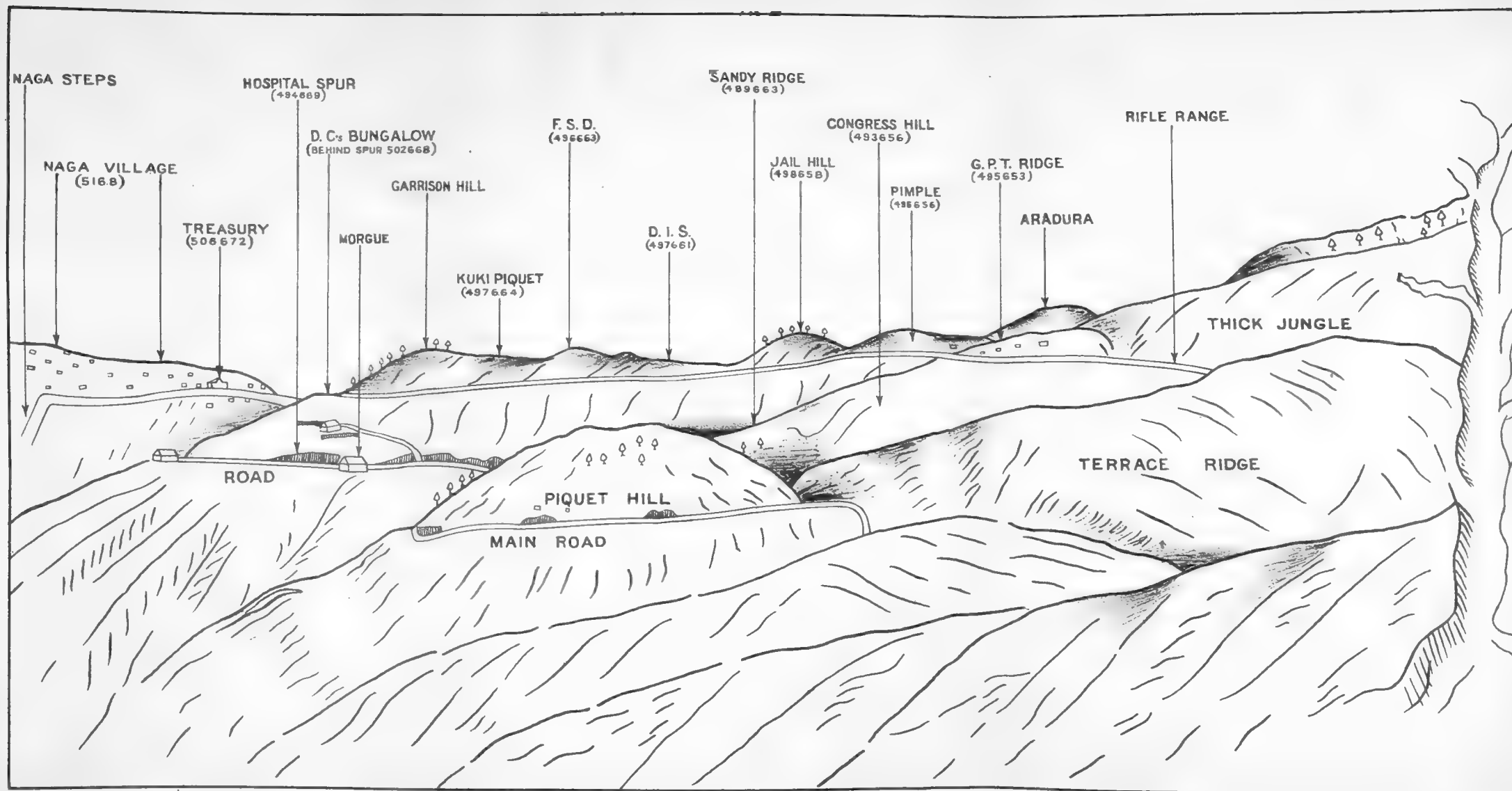


8 April, the brigade moved to a higher and more defensible ground in the area RE 4667. The intention was to give support to the Kohima garrison by artillery fire from the high ground instead of trying to move into the already congested positions within the town. On 9 April, 1/1 Punjab attacked southwards in its first move to re-open communications with the main force at Dimapur. It overran several Japanese bunkers, but was held up by stronger defensive positions before making further progress. During the night of 9/10 April the battalion (1/1 Punjab) was counter-attacked heavily and Japanese patrols were active in the Jotsoma area also. But the counter-attacks were beaten back and 10 April was utilised in consolidating the ground gained. On 11 April, the road westwards from Jotsoma was occupied up to milestone 41. But at night the Japanese infiltrated again and reoccupied the road. The next night there were further Japanese counter-attacks against 1/1 Punjab which were again driven off. The Punjabis continued their slow grinding advance against stiff opposition and cleared several covered Japanese trenches with the help of anti-tank rifles. On 12 April, the spur from Jotsoma to milestone 41 was again cleared of the Japanese, who, however, came back once more during the night. A Japanese party, about one company in strength, was engaged and destroyed the same day near the 53rd Indian General Hospital, and the papers captured in the engagement showed that the troops attacking Kohima belonged to the *58th Regiment* and the *138th Regiment* of the Japanese *31st Division*. The next two days saw more minor skirmishes as individual Japanese bunkers were liquidated laboriously by the succeeding waves of attack. By this time the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade had reached a position between milestones 40 and 41. The Japanese opposition was weakening perceptibly and their artillery was not able to fire more than a limited number of rounds due to shortage of ammunition. On 15 April, the forward units of the brigade reached the damaged bridge over the nullah at milestone 40 and established contact with the 5th British Brigade advancing from Dimapur, as related above.

After breaking down its own siege, the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade turned about and commenced operations for relieving the hard pressed garrison of Kohima. On 16 April, it advanced eastwards with the 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers of the 6th British Brigade under its command. 1/1 Punjab found little difficulty in occupying Punjab Ridge and Terrace Ridge with the support of the divisional artillery of the 2nd British Division, although the fighting was stiff. But the next day (17 April), the Japanese countered this move by occupying Sandy Ridge. In spite of it, on the 18th morning 1/1 Punjab broke through the Japanese positions and linked up with the garrison of Kohima, as already described. But little more could be



# PANORAMA FROM PUNJAB RIDGE (478675) LOOKING EAST





done that day than to evacuate the wounded out of Kohima and to stiffen up the garrison. During the night of 18/19 April, the Japanese launched a violent attack on 4 Rajput holding Terrace Hill. The Rajputs suffered heavy casualties and, after a desperate defence, were forced to evacuate the hill. On the morning of 19 April, 2 DLI counter-attacked Terrace Hill. It stormed its way through withering Japanese fire, but could not capture the entire position. As the situation remained indeterminate, 2 DLI was ordered to fall back on Punjab Ridge the same evening. But the next morning (20 April), the battalion advanced again with the help of tanks of the 149th Royal Armoured Corps and opened the road to Picquet Hill and Garrison Hill again. The 1st Royal Berkshire Regiment then moved in and relieved the garrison of Kohima finally of their duties.

With the relief of the Kohima Garrison the first phase of the operations of the XXXIII Corps was completed. The stage was now set for the battle of Kohima, with the object of clearing the Japanese from the entire area. So far the operations had been hampered by the piecemeal arrival of the units of the 2nd British Division at Dimapur from Poona, Ahmednagar and Bangalore. This was hardly avoidable, but the result was that concentrations for attacks and an orderly allotment of tasks had become very difficult. To begin with, men, guns, ammunition and equipment were all in short supply. Each unit had quickly to be put into shape after arrival in the area. The hilly terrain also hindered a speedy advance. The steep and often precipitous slopes above and below the road made it extremely difficult and often impossible to deploy guns or to get vehicles off the road. In many cases the existing maps did not tally with the ground, and movement across the country was checked by unmarked nullahs and precipitous ravines. The lack of medium artillery also caused delay, since 3.7-inch howitzers and 25-pdr guns were found to be ineffective against the sturdy Japanese bunkers. Fortunately two guns of 5.5-inch calibre had been discovered in the Dimapur base and these were manned and operated by improvised crews. Due to the lack of tubes these guns were not actually brought into use till 18 April, but after that they proved just the right medicine for the Japanese bunkers.



## CHAPTER XV

# The Siege and Relief of Kohima (contd.)

### PLANS FOR THE RECAPTURE OF KOHIMA

The relief of the Kohima Garrison had scarcely been completed when plans were considered for ejecting the Japanese from their positions surrounding the town and for further operations against the Japanese 31st Division. It was clear that even after the siege of Kohima was broken, the town would have to be recaptured hill by hill and stiff fighting would be necessary.

On 17 April 1944, Major-General Grover, Commander of the 2nd British Division reviewed the situation, and his appreciation was that:

- (a) The Japanese were holding the ridge Cheswema-Kohima with a strong force and had thrown out outposts on the general line of the Zubza nullah. This nullah ran parallel and very close to the 2nd Division's main road line of communication from Phipema forward. Except at the two strong localities about 32 milestone and 37 milestone, this line of communication was unprotected.
- (b) The Japanese held all the dominating features in and about Kohima itself. The capture of each of these was in itself a major operation, not easy to stage because of the hilly ground and the difficulty of taking forward medium tanks.
- (c) Any attempt to occupy Kohima from the west and south-west was virtually to strike into the strongest Japanese positions, which ran in the shape of a horse-shoe, the right arm of which resting along the Merema spur threatened from a flank the line of communication of the 2nd Division. There was only one way in which the Kohima Garrison could be relieved; namely, by making contact with it along the axis of the main road from Dimapur into Kohima. It appeared possible, however, to establish a corridor to the garrison without fully occupying the big area, and the operation could be carried out by the forces immediately available. It was in fact carried out between 18 and 20 April, as described in the previous chapter.

He was further of the view that the first area which should be secured as a firm base for further operations was the one bounded



# DETAILED MAP OF KOHIMA TOWN

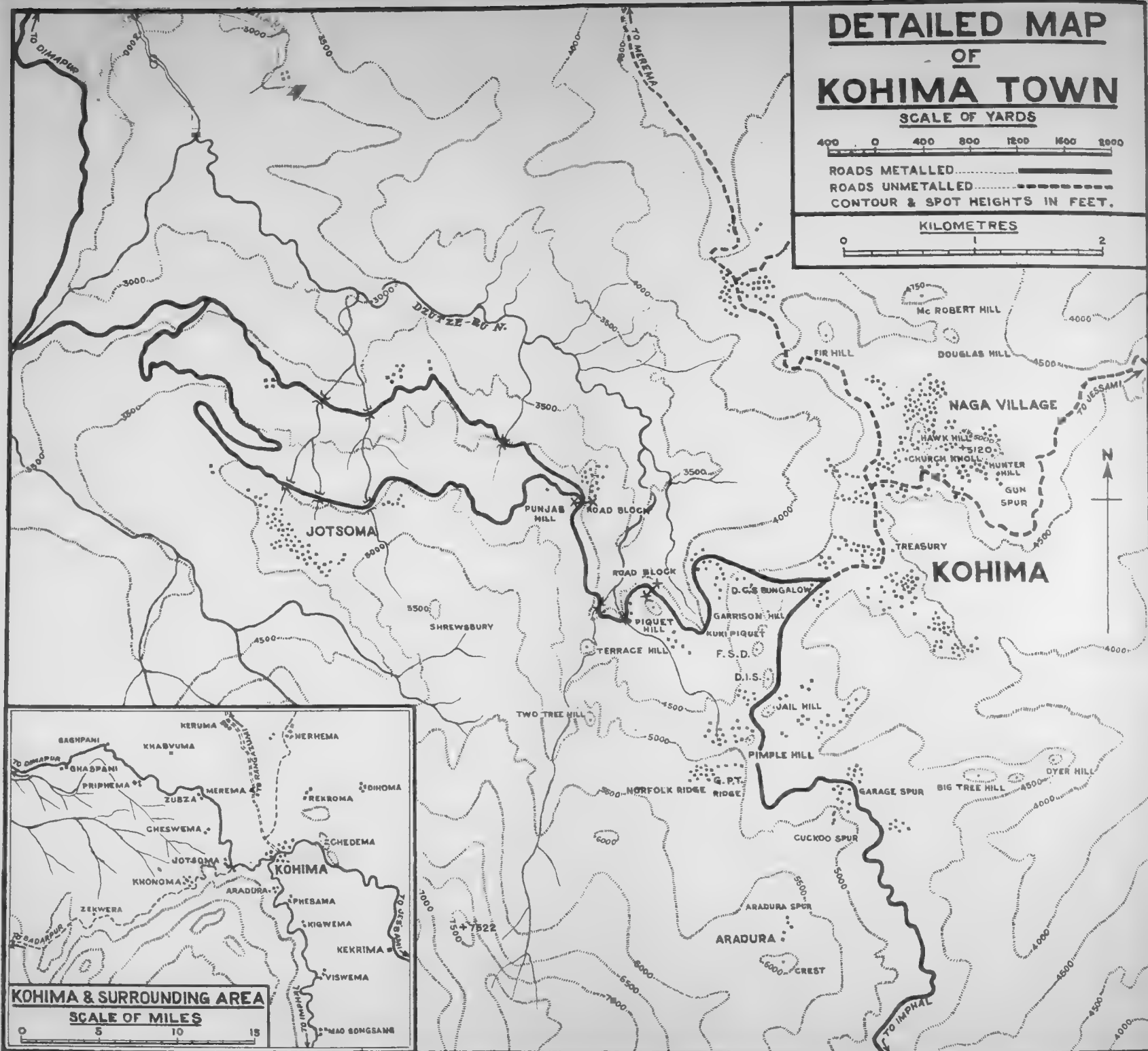
SCALE OF YARDS

400 0 400 800 1200 1600 2000

ROADS METALLED .....  
ROADS UNMETALLED .....  
CONTOUR & SPOT HEIGHTS IN FEET.

KILOMETRES

0 1 2





by Jail Hill, GPT Ridge, the Rifle Range and Jotsoma. This was a large area which might be captured only by an encircling movement via the Rifle Range, and the hutted area onto the GPT Ridge. The approach was rather difficult owing to the complete absence of any road communication from Jotsoma except a jeep track leading to Jail Hill. This operation would require at least two brigades in addition to the garrison in the existing perimeter around the Field Supply Depot and troops for the defence of the Jotsoma base. In short, he considered that for such an operation between three to four brigades would be required. He could not concentrate so strong a force forward in the Jotsoma area without completely uncovering the whole of the line of communication between milestone 28 and milestone 40, which faced a Japanese force of at least two battalions.<sup>1</sup>

Assuming that the latter course might be adopted, it would still require three brigades to hold the area captured, leaving only a very small portion of the force available for any further offensive operations. The development of further operations from this captured area would in itself have been very difficult, as the approaches to the commanding ground of Kohima village and the Treasury Ridge to the west of it were very difficult, and both positions were easy to defend. Moreover, any such advance would be virtually made with the hostile forces in the rear. The development of the above operation by this road, therefore, was not a feasible proposition without a very considerable additional support, probably amounting to another division.

The alternative course appeared to be to establish a strong defended area about Jotsoma to prevent any Japanese thrust from Kohima westwards, supported by two strong defended areas about Zubza and milestone 37 facing Merema and about Khabvuma and milestone 32 including Priphema. After the establishment of this firm base facing the hostile threat, further operations might be developed via Khabvuma onto the ridge Cheswema-Merema, and thence a southward advance might be made along what was undoubtedly the easiest access to Kohima itself.

The main advantages of this plan were that the main operations would advance from a secure base with a good line of communication behind it. Also it would develop an offensive against the Japanese flank instead of into the heart of their strongest defended area.

However, the plan was not without its drawbacks. It was necessary to construct at least a jeep-track via Khabvuma onto the ridge, Cheswema-Merema. This did not appear to be a very serious obstacle. But time was short, and the operation could proceed only

<sup>1</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps, April 1944 to June 1944.



after the withdrawal of the garrison in Kohima. Such a withdrawal was undesirable from the political and propaganda points of view. "In the Divisional Commander's opinion, this last factor could be discounted, because Kohima would soon be recaptured if the operation succeeded."

On 18 April 1944, Major-General Grover issued orders to carry out the above plan.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, since their arrival in the Kohima area about 4 April, the Japanese had built very strong defensive positions. The forward line of these positions was, from south to north, astride the nullah south of Jotsoma with the flank resting on the northwest slopes of Pulebadze (RE 458665)—Shrewsbury (RE 4766)—Terrace Hill (RE 482663)—GPT Ridge (RE 492651)—Jail Hill (RE 497658)—DIS (RE 497660)—Bald Spur and FSD Ridge—Kuki Picquet (RE 497665)—DC's Bungalow (RE 501668)—Treasury (RE 506671)—Naga Village—thence north along the ridge to Merema (RE 4873) and Cheswema (RE 5077), with a forward position held by a company a few hundred yards east of Khabvuma.<sup>3</sup>

A strong Japanese force was also reported to be occupying Khonoma. This northern extension of the main Japanese positions indicated that probably the Japanese would try to attack and capture Priphema, thus cutting the line of communication of the 2nd British Division also. But these fears proved to be unfounded when, on 19 April, 1 Royal Scots attacked and captured Khabvuma without difficulty. Khonoma was also found evacuated by the Japanese the same day.

The need for a speedy expulsion of the Japanese from the Kohima area before the monsoon was fully realised. In order to achieve this object Commander XXXIII Corps visited the 2nd British Division on 24 April to discuss a plan. This plan, briefly, was to maintain pressure in the centre with the 6th Brigade whilst the 4th Brigade and the 5th Brigade rolled up the right and left flanks, respectively, so that the 6th Brigade and any other troops available might deliver a major attack in the centre of the Japanese positions. A column of the 23rd LRP Brigade, transferred as already related, to the XXXIII Corps from "Special Force" at the end of March 1944, was operating south, and had reached Phekerkrima and was about to direct attacks against the Japanese lines of communication east of Kohima. The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was to remain in reserve about Jotsoma.

The plan was influenced to some extent by the information gleaned from the captured documents which indicated that one regiment and one battalion of the Japanese 31st Division were about

<sup>2</sup> 2nd Division Operation Instruction No. 9 dated 18 April 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps.



to be switched on to the Imphal area to help in capturing Imphal. But actually no such diversion took place, probably because the fierce Allied attacks in the Kohima area did not permit the Japanese to withdraw any troops from there.

In accordance with the plan, the 5th Brigade started its left hook on 21 April. The 1 Cameron crossed the Zubza nullah from Zubza and climbed up a long steep spur over 2000 feet up. The move proved to be a complete surprise and the Camerons occupied Merema without opposition. They discovered elaborately prepared positions for a large number of troops but the defenders were not there. The rest of the brigade soon followed the Camerons and by 27 April, Headquarters 5th Brigade, 1 Cameron, 7 WORC R and 1/8 LF from the 4th Brigade were all concentrated in the area RE 4971 on the road from Kohima to Bokajan. The motor road from Dimapur via Kohima was opened with the help of tanks from Treasury Corner. The following day, 28 April, the 5th Brigade advanced towards Kohima and occupied positions at the road junction at RE 495695. On 29 April, 1/8 LF launched an attack on a Japanese position at Fir Hill but was repulsed. Vigorous patrolling was carried out by the Camerons and 7 WORC R but further progress was negligible. However, by taking up positions on the Bokajan track and occupying Merema, the 5th Brigade had finally removed the threat of a Japanese attack against Dimapur via the Bokajan track, and the Dimapur—Kohima line of communication had also become safe. For the attack on Merema across the Zubza nullah supplies had to be carried by porters. But supply-dropping from the air was resorted to after the troops had occupied Merema. The Naga porters proved very useful in bringing back the casualties also from Merema to the dressing station at milestone 42.

A few days after the launching of the attack by the 5th Brigade, the 4th Brigade on the right flank also got ready to move. Its orders were to make an encircling movement from the right in full force less 1/8 LF, 143 SS Company and some elements of the 99th Field Regiment and 16th Field Regiment.<sup>4</sup> During the night of 25/26 April these troops moved from Jotsoma to Khonoma. Taking care to avoid being seen by the Japanese from the Cheswema ridge they moved across the hills led by Naga guides. The march was extremely arduous and rain enhanced their difficulties. The necessity for secrecy frequently made it impossible to light fires, and rations also were limited due to the difficulties of transport. Air-supply also was not attempted in order to obtain the maximum of surprise. The column had begun its march with each man carrying rations for three days but even this scale had soon to be reduced.

<sup>4</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps, *op. cit.*



The 143rd SS Company, leading the van, did not encounter any Japanese troops. The original plan had been to descend from the hills on to the Aradura spur on 28 April. But due to the very difficult going it became impossible to reach so far within the time given. Moreover, the 5th Brigade's advance had not progressed as expected and the 6th Brigade also was still held up in the centre. Accordingly, it was decided to reduce the depth of the turning movement and the 4th Brigade came down to GPT Ridge from the south-west. On 1 May, the 4th Brigade Tactical Headquarters, 2 Norfolk and 143rd SS Company reached Oaks Hill.<sup>5</sup> The feature was occupied without opposition and 1 RS also moved up to it the next day. On the afternoon of 2 May, a strong Japanese party attacked 1 RS in its position at RE 478648. The latter held its ground and repulsed the attack, but it was obvious that henceforth a serious danger had developed of the Japanese cutting off the supply line of the brigade. The 4th Brigade, however, held on to its positions and there were only minor clashes in the next few days.

In the meanwhile, heavy fighting had been going on in the sector occupied by the 6th Brigade. The Japanese made strong efforts by continuous attacks to dislodge it from the Garrison Hill but were repulsed each time. The British troops in their turn proved equally unsuccessful when the 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers tried to capture Shrewsbury with a view to reaching the Rifle Range area. The Japanese made a heavy attack on 2 DLI at 0200 hours on 23 April. The Allied position was not protected by barbed wire and the attackers came up to the very trenches where bitter hand to hand fighting took place. 2 DLI held firm and repulsed the attack losing 7 officers killed and 80 British other ranks killed and wounded in the attack. The Japanese also lost over 100 men killed. During the night of 26/27 April, the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow was attacked by 2 Dorset. After severe fighting the apex of the triangle comprising the bungalow's compound was captured and a number of Japanese bunkers were destroyed. This success secured both sides of the Kohima cross-roads and enabled tanks and armoured vehicles to advance towards the Naga village and the Jail Hill. The Japanese launched a number of determined counter-attacks to regain the position but failed each time after suffering heavy casualties. Their final effort was made on the night of 29/30 April when both sides remained firing at each other across the Deputy Commissioner's tennis court. In the end 2 Dorset remained in occupation of the bluff overlooking the road junction, although a few strong bunkers held by the Japanese still remained between its forward company and the main position.

During all these days the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade had

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



remained in reserve except 4 Royal West Kent which was resting and recuperating in Dimapur. On the departure of the 4th Brigade for the outflanking march the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade had occupied Jotsoma—Zubza area, where 4/1 Gurkha Rifles of the 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade joined it. A notable day for the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was 23 April when the Japanese air force made one of its rare appearances in the area. Twelve Japanese "Oscar" type fighters strafed the vehicles and guns massed at Zubza causing considerable damage.<sup>6</sup>

On 28 April, 4/7 Rajput of the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade, occupied Two Tree Hill without opposition. During the following two days the Japanese attacked the newly won position on Two Tree Hill but without success.

The position by the end of April was that the Japanese advance towards Dimapur and the railway had been stopped. The 2nd British Division had completed its build-up and was ready to clear the Japanese from Kohima area.

#### THE BATTLE FOR KOHIMA—FIRST PHASE

The assault on Kohima was to start on 30 April, but bad weather had delayed the deployment of the 2nd British Division and it had to be postponed till 4 May.

By the evening of 3 May deployment was completed. The 4th Brigade less 1/8 LF had taken up its position above and south-west of GPT Ridge; the 6th Brigade with 2 Dorset under its command was still on Garrison and Picquet Hills; the 5th Brigade less 2 Dorset with 1/8 LF under its command was about 502690-497692; and the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was in reserve in the Jotsoma area. The 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade was still advancing south to cut the Japanese communications east of Kohima.<sup>7</sup> The 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade in the Dimapur area was available as a Corps reserve.

The plan, in brief, was for the 4th and 5th Brigades to strike from the flanks whilst the 6th Brigade penetrated the centre along the FSD Ridge. Artillery fire support was to be given by switching the full weight of the guns from target area to target area on a timed programme, keeping pace with the advance of the infantry. Tanks of the 149th Royal Armoured Corps were to support the attack of the 6th Brigade on the axis of the Imphal road as far as ground permitted, and later were to assist the final stages of the 4th Brigade's attack. The air force was detailed to attack Japanese positions in depth and their communications. Owing to

<sup>6</sup> War Diary of 161st Indian Infantry Brigade for April 1944.

<sup>7</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps; April 1944 to June 1944.



the open flanks and line of communication of the attacking troops, some infantry units were employed defensively to hold "firm bases". But it was found that the Japanese had lost all their enterprise, and so these precautions proved unnecessary.

The long prepared attack opened on 4 May 1944, with the 4th Brigade and the 6th Brigade making a convergent attack towards Jail Hill and the 5th Brigade trying to capture the Naga village. In spite of heavy casualties caused by Japanese sniping and fire from unlocated machine-gun positions, the 4th Brigade captured GPT Ridge. But the Japanese had not been entirely eliminated; one group of bunkers on a spur to the north-east of GPT Ridge was still held strongly by them and their snipers were active in the jungle overlooking the ridge. Simultaneously, troops of the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade advanced and captured the area south-east of Two Tree Hill establishing contact with the 4th Brigade on GPT Ridge. But the attack by the 6th Brigade on Kuki Picquet and FSD Ridge did not meet with any material success. Fighting went on throughout the day and the attacking troops suffered heavy casualties. But by evening on 4 May, 2 DLI had obtained a precarious toe-hold on the FSD Ridge. The 5th Brigade attacked and captured a few Japanese forward positions in Naga village on the same day. By evening, the brigade was established in the north-western corner of the village (RE 5168).

During the night of 4/5 May, the Japanese launched determined counter-attacks against the 5th Brigade forward positions, in which they retook some ground from 1 Cameron. But in other sectors, the night passed off quietly. The 5 May also was spent by all brigades in consolidation and reorganisation after the heavy engagements of the previous day. The 4th Brigade collected rations, water and ammunition in the forward area to be ready for another thrust. Casualties were evacuated by Naga porters, and a jeep track was begun to serve as a line of communication. In the 6th Brigade area, two companies of 1 Royal Berks and two companies of 2 DLI consolidated their positions at RE 497692 and on FSD Ridge respectively. The 5th Brigade dug itself in on the western portion of the Naga village, without making any attempt to dislodge the Japanese from the rest of the village.

Then, early on the morning of 6 May, 2 Norfolk attacked and captured the north-east spur of GPT Ridge, after a fierce artillery barrage had pulverised the Japanese bunkers. But further progress was barred by a stretch of ground that was swept by machine-gun bullets from the Aradura Spur. The 6th Brigade spent the day in savage fighting against the remaining Japanese bunkers on FSD Ridge. In these attacks, 2 DLI again suffered heavy casualties without gaining much ground, and the position remained as before. The



5th Brigade sent out several fighting patrols towards the Treasury area. They succeeded in penetrating some distance through the Japanese positions, during which they inflicted some casualties on Japanese parties found digging new positions. Japanese resistance south of Kohima was proving more formidable than had been anticipated by the Allied commanders. Therefore, the 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 7th Indian Division, previously in Corps reserve, was put under the command of the 2nd Division on 6 May to lend additional weight to the attack.

During the last two days, all Allied attacks against FSD and the GPT Ridge had been frustrated by murderous fire from the Jail Hill. On 7 May, therefore, 1 Queens of the 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade attacked Jail Hill. 'Pimble' was overrun without difficulty. Then, in the face of heavy defensive fire from the neighbouring features, the attack was pressed home on Jail Hill, and two companies succeeded in reaching their objectives.<sup>8</sup> Before they could dig in, however, they were met by intense machine-gun fire at close range from the Japanese-held positions on GPT Ridge and DIS and were forced to withdraw under cover of a smoke-screen put down on both flanks by all available artillery and 3" mortars. The same day (7 May), 4 Rajput came up and relieved 2 DLI which had suffered heavy casualties in its vain attacks of the last few days.

The strength and excellent siting of Japanese defences in Kohima and their arrangement for mutual support between different positions, together with the amazing ability of the Japanese troops to keep up their morale in spite of staggering casualties, made the battle for Kohima a far tougher proposition than had been expected. Allied attacks between 4 to 7 May, therefore, had met with only a partial success. During these two dates, mountain artillery had fired over 3000 rounds from thirty-eight Howitzers of 3.7" bore, forty-eight 25-pounder field guns had fired over 7000 rounds and the big 5.5" guns of the Medium Artillery had hurled more than 1,500 shells at the Japanese positions.<sup>9</sup> Salvos from massed 3" mortars had also been used, apart from constant strafing and bombing by Hurricanes and Vengeance dive-bombers. It appeared hardly possible that any thing could survive the continuous deluge of fire and steel, but the Japanese infantry continued to fight back doggedly and skilfully. They had virtually no air support and very few artillery guns. But their bunkers were deep and exceedingly well constructed and stood up to all except the 5.5" guns and the 75-mm tank guns at close range. There were only two 5.5" guns available in the XXXIII Corps, and the tanks could reach areas like the GPT and FSD Ridges only with difficulty due to the steep slopes and the rain and slippery

<sup>8</sup> War Diary of 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade.

<sup>9</sup> Operations XXXIII Corps, p. 16.



mud. About 9 May, therefore, two 6-pounder guns were hauled up on to GPT Ridge to fire point-blank into the Japanese bunkers. But the problem was not solved by them, as shown by the subsequent bitter fighting.

The period 8 to 10 May was relatively quiet, with the 2nd Division regrouping for a second attempt to clear Kohima of the Japanese. Extremely bitter fighting flared up again in the night of 10/11 May and continued during the course of the next three days. On this night, the 4th Brigade launched an attack on the Japanese-held positions on the lower slope of GPT Ridge and Pimple Hill, and at first light next morning the 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade attacked Jail Hill and the DIS area. For this attack, the Corps Commander had insisted on the extensive use of smoke. Weather conditions were excellent, and the whole area of the fighting was kept under a smoke cloud for 2 hours from dawn. It was found that this greatly reduced the volume of medium machine-gun and light machine-gun defensive fire, which indicated that the Japanese had organised no fixed lines of fire. These attacks were pressed home against stubborn opposition. All available guns were used to lay down an intense barrage, and tanks moved up in close support overcoming several road-blocks on the way. By noon on 11 May the Allied troops had cleared GPT Ridge and were on Pimple Hill, FSD and Jail Hill, though the Japanese remained in occupation of several isolated positions. Jail Hill was captured by 1 Queens and C Company of 4/1 Gurkha Rifles. On DIS, 4/15 Punjab came under intense medium machine-gun fire from bunkers on the position and from posts on FSD Ridge still in Japanese hands. During their first assault, heavy casualties were suffered and the attack failed. But a second attack was mounted by 4/15 Punjab and D Company of 4/1 Gurkha Rifles together. The troops displayed remarkable dash and stamina in the bitter daylong battle. When night fell, they were still 4 to 10 yards from the top of DIS hill, but they hung on to their hard-won positions.<sup>10</sup>

The night of 11/12 May passed off without the Japanese counter-attacking anywhere. This was encouraging as showing that the Japanese survivors were too weak to do anything except resist passively, though bitterly. On 12 May, tanks advanced again after intensive mine-clearing and opened fire on Japanese bunkers on GPT Ridge. The remaining Japanese bunkers on Jail Hill were cleared by 4/1 Gurkha Rifles. By that evening 1 Queens and three companies of 4/1 Gurkha Rifles were dug in on Jail Hill. The 4/15 Punjab and one company of 4/1 Gurkha Rifles were on DIS hill, though fighting went on against a few remaining Japanese

<sup>10</sup> War Diary of 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade.



bunkers there. The unarmed "Followers" of 4/15 Punjab distinguished themselves by going up under fire to carry ammunition to the forward troops and to evacuate casualties. On the bitterly-contested FSD Ridge, 1 Royal Berkshire finally liquidated the Japanese defenders on 12 May and captured the hill. The Japanese, it was discovered had honey-combed the hill by digging and tunnelling and converted it into an elaborate underground fortress, including a battalion headquarters inside.

On the morning of 13 May, 4/15 Punjab discovered that the remaining Japanese troops had evacuated their positions in Detail Issue Section area quietly during the night. This hill, therefore, fell into the hands of 4/15 Punjab after two days of gruelling fighting during which the battalion had suffered 140 casualties.<sup>11</sup> The same day, 2 Dorset finally captured the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow with the help of tanks. In mopping up operations against the remnants of the Japanese garrison, Kuki Picquet, FSD and Jail Hill were also cleared by the evening of 13 May. Then, before the Japanese could recover from these disasters, the 4th Brigade attacked the bunkers around Pimple Hill with the support of tanks on 14 May.

During the night of 14/15 May, 4/1 Gurkha Rifles with considerable skill succeeded in infiltrating on to Treasury Ridge. Only a few Japanese were found on it, and the feature was occupied without fighting. At first light on 15 May, elements of the 5th Brigade advanced southwards along the road. They were supported by tanks, and, brushing aside the weak resistance, linked up with the Gurkhas on Treasury Ridge the same day. This success brought to an end the first stage of the battle for the reconquest of Kohima.

#### THE BATTLE FOR KOHIMA—SECOND PHASE

The next task was to clear the northern and eastern parts of Naga village and the Aradura Spur. The Japanese were holding strong positions on Church Knoll, on Hunter Hill in the area of Point 5120 and on Gun Spur (518676). To the south the continued Japanese occupation of the Aradura Spur feature still made it impossible to regard Kohima as a safe base for further operations. Not until the commanding ground to the east of the Naga village, and Aradura were cleared of the Japanese could the battle of Kohima be said to be completed, as all the newly-won Allied positions were within effective artillery range of these features and the Japanese still blocked the Imphal road and the Jessami track.

During the second phase of the reconquest of Kohima, the XXXIII Corps had no lack of troops or guns or supplies. Early in May 1944, the Headquarters 7th Indian Division and 114th Indian Infantry Brigade had reached Dimapur from the Arakan front.

<sup>11</sup> Operations XXXIII Corps, p. 17.



The 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade had already arrived in the area, as mentioned earlier. The third brigade of the 7th Indian Division, the 89th Indian Infantry Brigade, had been sent to Imphal and was fighting to clear the Kohima—Imphal road from the Imphal end. But the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was placed under the command of the 7th Indian Division in lieu of the 89th, thus bringing up the division to its normal strength. Moreover, the 268th Lorried Brigade also arrived in the XXXIII Corps area on 16 May. Although not trained or organised for the role of the orthodox infantry, the 268th Lorried Brigade was used to give relief to the brigades of the 2nd Division so that they might rest for short periods between front-line operations. Each brigade was sent forward for attacks for three or four days and was then withdrawn to Dimapur for a similar period of rest and relaxation. By this method, the troops were enabled to sustain their morale and keenness during the prolonged operations for the reconquest of Kohima and reopening the Imphal road. The comforts and amenities at Dimapur were greatly improved by the commander of the 253rd Lines of Communication Sub-Area, so that the British troops might be made fit again for fighting within the shortest period.<sup>12</sup> ENSA teams were obtained to perform at Dimapur, and all the comforts were provided. The supply of medium guns also had been arranged for, and 1 Medium Regiment was employed to blast the Japanese defenders from their bunkers at point-blank ranges.

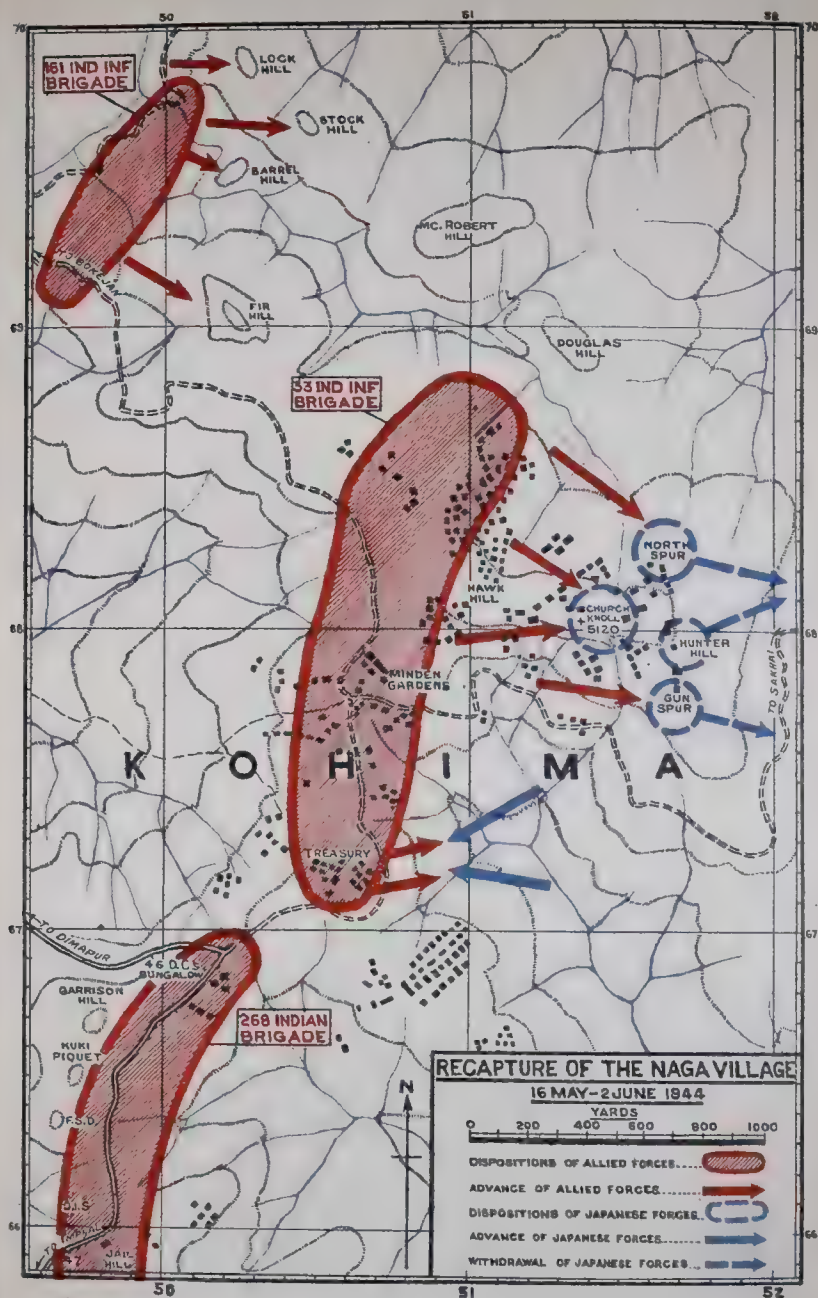
On the other hand, the Japanese troops had suffered exceedingly heavy casualties during the past two months, and were only a fraction of their original strength now. They had received no reinforcements; the question of periodic reliefs from the front-line to sustain morale did not arise for them. They had neither air support, nor tanks, nor adequate artillery. Even the medical and supply services had ceased to exist for them.<sup>13</sup> Faced by an Allied numerical superiority of about 5 : 1, pounded incessantly by guns and bombs and decimated by battle, disease and hunger, the Japanese remnants fought on with skill and determination. In spite of the improved situation, therefore, the second phase of the reconquest of Kohima proved as difficult as the first.

When the second stage commenced on 16 May 1944, the first three days saw no major engagements. Both the sides carried out

<sup>12</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps.

<sup>13</sup> After the war the Japanese were asked whether one of the causes of their defeat at Kohima was that they did not adhere to certain fundamental principles of war such as co-ordination, surprise and maintenance of the objective. Their answer was that these principles were emphasised but their defeat in that area was due to (i) bad line of communication, (ii) heavy losses in men and material, (iii) personnel reinforcements being ill trained and (iv) no reinforcements of material at all. How far was the sea and air war of attrition in the south-west Pacific responsible for this state of affairs in Burma, it is difficult to say.







vigorous patrolling. The Japanese shelled Treasury Ridge and carried out a small attack on the feature during the night of 18/19 May. But they were easily repulsed by 4/1 Gurkha Rifles who were defending the post. Their efforts to penetrate towards Jail Hill and the FSD area the same night met with a similar fate. The 5th Brigade consolidated its hold on the northern part of Naga village and set up ten tanks, within its perimeter, as improvised artillery to check Japanese attacks.

On 19 May, the 5th Brigade attacked Point 5120, which was the highest point in the village and was vital for its defence. It overran some bunker positions with the help of medium tanks, but was held up soon by heavy cross fire from well-sited Japanese strong-points where tanks could not reach them. In the end, the attack had to be called off. The next day, the Corps Commander visited the 5th Brigade and ordered it to be sent back to Dimapur for three days' rest. On 22 May, the 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade took over the Naga Hill positions from the 5th Brigade. Headquarters 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade was located at RE 509681, and 4/15 Punjab was stationed on the north sector of the hill.

The next three days were spent in preparations and in efforts to destroy Japanese positions by artillery fire. On 23 May, 1 Medium Regiment and 5/22 Medium Artillery Battery of 5.5" guns opened fire at Point 5120, North Spur, Church Knoll, Hunter Hill, and Gun Spur. The area northwards of the Deputy Commissioner's Bungalow was placed in charge of the Headquarters 7th Indian Division, with the 33rd and the 161st Indian Infantry Brigades under it, on 24 May.<sup>14</sup> On 25 May, 4/15 Punjab attacked Point 5120 in lowering clouds and steady rain. In spite of the support of tanks and Corps artillery, the first attack was repulsed by the Japanese defenders. With great gallantry, 4/15 Punjab stormed the height again, and succeeded in reaching the peak. But there it met with heavy fire from mortars and machine-guns, and was forced to abandon its prize. Exchange of mortar and gun fire continued on 26 May, without either side making any major effort.

During the night of 26/27 May, the Japanese carried out small attacks against the brigade perimeter at RE 510683, but were beaten back. The morning of 27 May broke dull with steady drizzle of rain and mist covering the hillside. Allied aircraft bombed and strafed the Japanese positions about noon, but no attack was attempted. Late in the evening the Japanese again tried to advance in small parties against the positions held by 4/15 Punjab but were repelled once more. The air attacks by "Hurri-bombers", (Hurricanes adapted for bombing) were repeated on 28 May, and appeared

<sup>14</sup> War Diary Headquarters 7th Indian Division, G Branch for May 1944.



very accurate, taking place hardly 100 yards from the Indian positions on Point 5120. But the situation remained unchanged, and two more attacks by 4/15 Punjab on Point 5120 were thrown back. Then, on 29 May, three 5.5" guns were used to bombard the peak, each gun firing 300 rounds at an average range of only 1500 yards. The effect was devastating, the formidable Japanese bunkers appearing to disintegrate and collapse every time they were hit. Tanks also fired at designated targets, and three separate air attacks were carried out in the course of the morning.<sup>15</sup> With the help of this massive fire support and infiltrating skilfully, 4/1 Gurkha Rifles occupied Gun Spur (RE 517677), 400 yards south-west of Point 5120, and Basha Hill near it.

4/15 Punjab at the same time captured Church Knoll or Point 5120 (RE 513681), but had to abandon it again when Japanese mortars opened up against them, causing heavy casualties. During the night of 29/30 May, 4/1 Gurkha Rifles was counter-attacked twice, but held on to its post. The following day, it attacked the remaining "Bashas" held by the Japanese on Basha Hill, but was repulsed. That day, 4 Royal West Kent relieved 4/15 Punjab, which was sent back. It was realised that 4/15 Punjab had been almost continuously in action for many weeks and had suffered severe losses in Arakan and on DIS Ridge and Naga village, and was sadly in need of rest and reorganisation. So it was withdrawn from the 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade on 30 May, and the 1st Burma Regiment was sent up from Corps troops in replacement.<sup>16</sup>

During the night of 30/31 May, the Japanese quietly evacuated the Basha Hill and escaped eastwards. This proved the beginning of a sudden collapse of their resistance on Naga village. North of the village, the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade had been operating offensively. Japanese opposition in the sector was feeble, and by 1 June 1944, 1/1 Punjab and 4 Royal West Kent had captured the three small hills of Lock, Stock and Barrel, and also the top of Fir Hill.<sup>17</sup> The continuous artillery barrage, air bombing and strafing and the determined, relentless infantry assault now produced their cumulative effect. Unable to prolong the unequal contest any longer, the Japanese evacuated the entire Naga village on 2 June and withdrew eastwards.

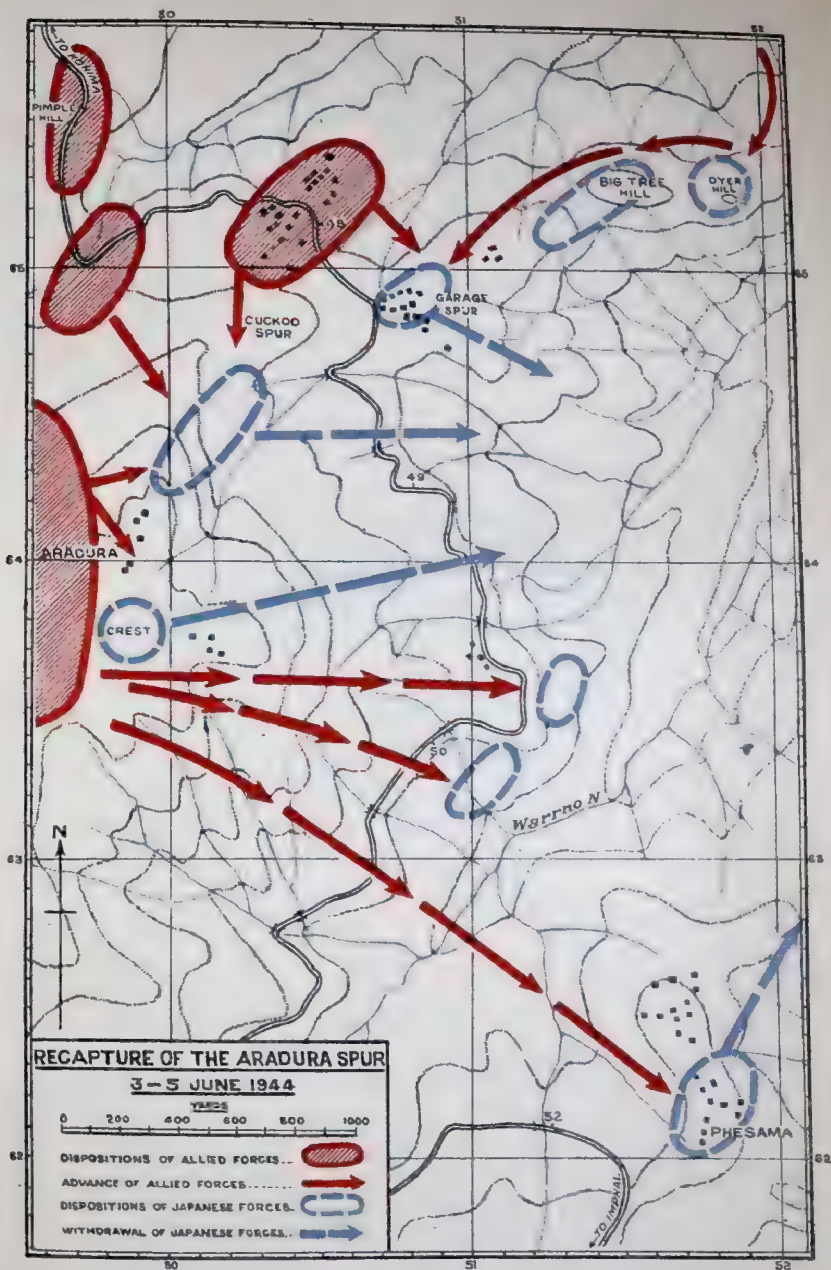
Meanwhile, operations had been progressing in the south for the recapture of the Aradura Spur also. In this sector, the Japanese were entrenched on the high crest of the Spur with outposts thrown forward, and linked up to their main positions east of the road at milestone 48 and Garage Spur. The whole area was thickly wooded

<sup>15</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 33rd Indian Brigade.

<sup>16</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps.

<sup>17</sup> War Diary of 161st Indian Infantry Brigade.







and fairly steep, and the carpet of pine-needles had been rendered exceedingly slippery by the rains. It was obvious that a frontal attack on the position would be costly in men and difficult of achievement. The two alternatives were to capture the position by outflanking movements either from the east or from the west. The former, or the "left hook", would be open to a flank attack from the Naga village, and so would be practicable only after the Japanese had been cleared from that area. Hence the decision was taken in favour of the "right hook". From 15 to 20 May, vigorous patrolling was carried out by the 2nd Division troops to reconnoitre and determine the strength and dispositions of the Japanese defences on Aradura Spur. On the basis of information thus obtained, the forces were deployed for the attack. The 6th Brigade, supported by the 1st Burma and the 1st Assam Regiments occupied the Allied right wing from Oaks Hill to Norfolk Ridge, with the task of advancing south and outflanking Aradura from the west. The 4th Brigade was placed in the centre from Norfolk Ridge to Pimple Hill, and was ordered to engage the Spur frontally. The 5th Brigade was placed in reserve in the area RE 4865, while the 268th Indian Lorried Brigade occupied the left wing sector from Pimple Hill to Deputy Commissioner's Bunglow. The Headquarters 2nd Division was located in Jotsoma, defended by 1 Cameron.<sup>18</sup>

After several days of constant air attacks, the troops moved against Aradura Spur on 26 May. Opposition at first was negligible, and only the wet weather slowed up the attacking troops. By next day, the 4th Brigade established itself along a line from RE 501647 to milestone 48 on the road. The 6th Brigade continued its advance towards the western and southern side of Aradura Crest, and 2nd Recce Regiment occupied the feature at RE 477632 against slight opposition. By the evening of 27 May, however, the attack began to peter out. The 4th Brigade, and 5th Brigade backing it up, were subjected to heavy artillery fire by the Japanese positions on Garage Spur and on the reverse slope of Aradura Spur. The brigades were soon forced to withdraw to their starting line to avoid heavy casualties. The 6th Brigade also met heavy machine-gun fire from the Crest, but succeeded in digging itself to the south-west of the Crest. But the "right hook" had failed by 28 May. Fortunately by then the Japanese in Naga village were being pressed hard by the 7th Indian Division, as already related, and were in no position to interfere with the attack on Aradura. Hence it was decided to attempt the outflanking movement from the east. This involved further reshuffling of units. The 6th Brigade was left in position south-west of Aradura, but the 4th Brigade withdrew to RE 494655. On

<sup>18</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps, p. 21.



1 and 2 June, the Aradura Spur was bombed and bombarded heavily and patrols of 2 DLI and the 1st Burma Regiment kept up the pressure from the front. On 3 June, the 5th Brigade started the outflanking movement from the east, advancing towards Big Tree Hill via Dyer Hill. By 0900 hours on 4 June, Dyer Hill was occupied by a company of 2 Dorset and the advance continued. Big Tree Hill, which had been found unoccupied by a patrol on the previous day, was now discovered to be strongly held by Japanese troops. This unexpected resistance and intense machine-gun fire from Garage Spur halted the advance, in spite of 2 Dorset being reinforced by 1 Cameron and 7 WORC R. On 5 June, some reshuffling of troops was carried out, and the 6th Brigade took over the western wing from the 4th Brigade, which withdrew into reserve for rest. Big Tree Hill was subjected to concentrated artillery barrage and then 1 Cameron stormed the position with the help of tanks. The defenders were driven out and the position was occupied without difficulty the same day. The Japanese positions on Garage Spur, though elaborately prepared for stubborn defence, were found evacuated and were occupied by 1 Cameron on the night of 5/6 June. 2 DLI at the same time crossed the road and occupied several Japanese positions to the west of it without opposition. The whole Japanese resistance was crumbling rapidly, and 2 Dorset occupied Phesama soon after without opposition. The Allied troops were now placed in a position to cut off the Japanese on Aradura Spur from their bases and strong-points to the east of the road. Realising it, the Japanese gave up the Spur without further fighting, and their remnants disappeared into the dense forests. By nightfall on 5 June 1944, the reconquest of Kohima was completed by the Allied capture of Aradura Spur and Phesama. Thus came to an end the long and arduous battle of Kohima, which had lasted almost exactly two months.

#### OPERATIONS OF THE 23RD BRIGADE

The reconquest of Kohima would have proved even more difficult without the strategic co-operation of the units of the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade. This brigade had been sent to the XXXIII Corps area early in April 1944, organised into the following columns, each with the strength roughly of half a battalion<sup>19</sup> :—

33 Column	} made up of 2 DWR
76 Column	
34 Column	} made up of 4 Border
55 Column	
44 Column	} made up of 1 Essex
56 Column	

<sup>19</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps, p. 23



All these units were fully trained and adequately equipped for jungle fighting and for marching long distances over trackless hills and thick forests. The plan was to use them like so many rapier-thrusts deep into the vitals of the Japanese *31st Division*. Starting from the plains of Assam, the columns were to advance south and east and cut the Kohima—Jessami road and other tracks serving as the line of communication of the Japanese troops in the Kohima area.

Accordingly, the six columns struck out into the wilderness of the northern Naga hills on 12 April from their "jumping off" positions between Jamuguri and Nazira. Where they were going, the main enemy was the terrain and the climate, against which they were well-prepared. The Japanese troops in the area were few and far between, and the advancing columns encountered them only occasionally. This lack of serious opposition permitted the columns to spread themselves out and advance along parallel lines. They thus occupied a lot of ground and gave to the Japanese an exaggerated estimate of their strength, without being too far from one another to concentrate quickly when faced by serious opposition.

The first encounter took place on 15 April between a Japanese party and a platoon of 33 Column, which brushed aside the weak opposition and continued its advance. On 16 April, a larger Japanese party was encountered by 44 Column near Phekerkrima. By that time, 56 Column was about 6 miles east of Bokajan ; 76 Column was near Sanis and 34 Column and 55 Column were at Mokochung.<sup>20</sup> For about a week thereafter, there were no further clashes. On 22 April, 44 Column and 56 Column made a concerted attack on Phekerkrima in conjunction with the 2nd British Division. That attack failed, but the next day Phekerkrima fell to 44 Column who attacked again with the support of a very accurate air attack made by No. 11 Hurricane Squadron. By 29 April, the forward units had reached the following localities:—

60 Column, composed of 60 Field Regiment, at NV 010203 ;

34 Column, of 4 Border, at RE 932942 ; and

55 Column, of 4 Border, at MZ 878010.

Continuing their advance in May 1944, the columns had a number of minor clashes with Japanese patrols. All the troops acquitted themselves well in these encounters and the advance continued. The Japanese opposition was heaviest in the area penetrated by 44 Column and 56 Column. But even in this area the Allied troops overcame all opposition expeditiously and well, without permitting their advance to be delayed. As a result, the Japanese thought that a very large force consisting of at least

<sup>20</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps.



two brigades was advancing against their lines of communication. To help the deception, the commander of the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade gave bogus orders and instructions over the wireless to phantom columns that did not really exist. By 26 May, the Brigade Headquarters was established at Khuzami. The 44 Column had reached Thizama and 56 Column was at Nerhema. The 33 Column and 76 Column, made up of 2 DWR, were in the areas of Khesbmi and Rangazumi respectively. The 4 Border, comprising the Columns 55 and 34, had by that date reached Khom and Point 5208. The 60 Column and 88 Column were operating near Jessami and Pansat. By the fourth week of May, therefore, these columns had successfully carried out their task of cutting the Japanese lines of communication from Kohima to Jessami and eastwards. The Japanese evacuation of the Naga village and Aradura Spur was undoubtedly hastened by the activities of these columns. By 4 June, the 23rd L.R.P. Brigade had captured Phakekedzumi, and the Jessami-Somra track was effectively blocked. Air-strips were built at Wokha, Mokochung and Khuzami from where aircraft operated in support of the columns.

By the end of the first week of June 1944, therefore, the reconquest of Kohima had been completed by the assaults of the 2nd British Division, the 7th Indian Division and the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade. The hour had come to exploit the major Japanese defeat and to reopen the Kohima-Imphal road.

#### REOPENING OF THE IMPHAL ROAD

On 5 June 1944, Lieut.-General Stopford, commander of the XXXIII Corps, visited the 2nd Division and the 7th Indian Division, and gave instructions regarding the operations to be conducted next. The monsoon had started and the Japanese were experiencing immense difficulties owing to the disruption of their communications. They had already suffered severe casualties and, if the attack were pressed home, their withdrawal might be turned into a rout. The Corps Commander formulated a plan to achieve these objectives. The 2nd Division was to advance south along\* the main road to Imphal, assisted by tanks and self-propelled artillery. At the same time, the 7th Indian Division was to move south-east and south with the object of threatening the Japanese troops facing the 2nd Division by a flank attack at every stage. If possible the 7th Indian Division was to prevent the Japanese remnants from escaping eastwards and then to co-operate tactically with the 2nd Division, if the latter were held up for long before any Japanese stronghold. Further to the east the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade was to strike through the hills towards Ukhrul. It would serve



further to threaten the Japanese communications and would surround and annihilate their troops as they retreated eastwards in confusion. The Corps Headquarters was moved from Dimapur to milestone 32 on 4 June.

Immediately after the capture of Aradura Spur on 6 June, one company of 7 WORC R pushed down the road up to milestone 54 and, while the rest of the battalion occupied Phesama, the Japanese road-blocks and mines near milestone 48 were cleared by engineers, who also repaired the bridge at milestone 48½. Tanks following up the forward units reached milestone 51, beyond which a broken bridge prevented their progress that day. Continuing the advance on 7 June, 2 Norfolk reached milestone 55 and drove away a small Japanese party from the spur overlooking the road. By that evening, Tactical Headquarters of the 4th Brigade and 1/8 LF were established at Kigwema and Headquarters 5th Brigade, with 1 Cameron, occupied Phesama. The engineers again distinguished themselves by removing mines and road-blocks and repairing damaged bridges in record time. Their exploit, which had an important bearing on the rapidity of movement, was rendered possible by the fact that the Japanese usually failed to destroy the abutments of the bridges and only tried to break down the super-structure. On the morning of 8 June, the advance was continued by the 4th Brigade and the armoured column. 1/8 LF pushed on rapidly and reached milestone 59 with 1 Royal Scots and 2 Norfolk close behind it, but at this point it met the first serious opposition since the capture of Aradura. The road between milestone 59 and milestone 60 was thickly strewn with mines and was covered by at least two 75-mm guns apart from small-arms fire. The Japanese had converted Viswema village and Basha Spur into well prepared strong-points and were ready to block any further advance. A hasty attack against the Japanese positions failed and the troops had to spend the night in the vicinity of milestone 58. This development bore out the statement of a prisoner that the Japanese intended to hold a strong defensive line from Kekrima to Viswema, their main force taking a stand in the rear.<sup>21</sup> But this halt allowed the engineers and the artillery to catch up with the rapid advance of the forward troops and to consolidate their hold on the road.

On 9 June, 1 Royal Scots crept round the eastern side of Viswema village and occupied its southern end. The 2nd Reconnaissance Regiment sent out patrols to find a route to the west road Point 7968, and 2 Norfolk spent the day in extensive patrolling and reconnaissance to find out the siting and dispositions of the Japanese positions. On 10 June, another attempt by 1 Cameron to push

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



back the road-blocks and continue the advance was defeated. Heavy defensive fire was poured forth by the Japanese from Shaving Brush and Basha Spurs and the troops remained halted. 11 June also was spent in fruitless attacks against the densely wooded Shaving Brush Spur, which came to grief due to an inaccuracy in the maps which did not tally with the ground. When the real configuration of the hill features was realised, the intended attack by 7 WORC R was put off and the troops were reshuffled. On 13 June, 1 Cameron climbed up a precipitous slope above Shaving Brush Spur and the next day they swooped down from the dizzy heights on to Shaving Brush Spur. By noon on 14 June, 1 Cameron had ploughed through the opposition and established contact with 1/8 LF on the road. 7 WORC R meanwhile had attacked the Viswema village and Wooded Spur with the help of tanks, machine-gun fire and artillery barrage. The attacking troops killed or drove out the defenders and occupied their objectives by evening the same day. Though mopping up of stray Japanese troops continued for a couple of days longer, the main opposition was broken and the advance was immediately taken up again. The 6th Brigade with the 2nd Reconnaissance Regiment and the tanks passed ahead and reached milestone 62 where they were halted by a broken bridge. The engineers immediately started working to restore the bridge and completed their task by the dawn of 15 June. That morning the 6th Brigade moved up again headed by an armoured column.

The advance met with no opposition prior to reaching milestone 64 where the leading tank was ambushed and damaged. Brushing aside that minor resistance, the column advanced about another mile where it was held up by Japanese positions firing from the west of the road. Further advance proving impracticable that day, the 6th Brigade established itself at Khuzami while the 5th Brigade reached Viswema. Sporadic firing took place during the night of 15/16 June, and on the morning of 16 June a heavy artillery bombardment was inflicted on the Japanese positions. 2 DLI and the tanks attacked immediately after and broke through easily. They advanced some distance but were held up again by a land-slide which had blocked the road in the area of the bridge at milestone 65. In consequence, the 6th Brigade had to halt for the night just one mile north of Mao Songsang. On 17 June, the Japanese prevented further progress by appearing again on the thickly wooded spurs to the west of the road at milestone 64½. Mopping up operations were again taken in hand, but were slowed down due to the thick jungle and the difficult ground. On the night of 17/18 June, heavy artillery fire was opened against the Japanese positions in Mao Songsang. After several hours' pounding by a large number of guns on the morning of 18 June, 1 Cameron started an encircling movement from the west and



Lieut.-General  
George E. Stratemeyer (USAAF)  
Air Commander  
Eastern Air Command



Major-General O. L. Roberts  
Commander 23rd Indian Division





Special Force troops in Japanese occupied  
Burma wading through water on patrol duty

Soldiers wounded during the Second Wingate Expedition  
awaiting evacuation by air in Central Burma





7 WORC R from the east. Falsifying all expectations, the Japanese this time evacuated Mao Songsang immediately and precipitately retreated eastwards. The armoured column with the 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers and two squadrons of the 2nd Reconnaissance Regiment passed through. The 5th Brigade followed them and pressed on south, leaving the 6th Brigade less the 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers to occupy Mao Songsang. Meeting no resistance, the forward troops raced on to Tuphema and beyond up to milestone 78. Here the advance was stopped again by a broken bridge. A party of sappers sent forward to repair the bridge was fired on by Japanese mortars, and the armoured column had to halt for the night in the area of milestone 77. By that evening 1 Cameron and the 2nd Reconnaissance Regiment were in Tuphema. The 6th Brigade less the 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers was in Mao Songsang and the 4th Brigade was still in reserve at Khuzami. The next day, 18 June, saw very rapid advance, the infantry marching about 16 miles. The Corps Headquarters moved up the same day from milestone 32 to milestone 54. The XXXIII Corps was now within sight of its goal and was confident of linking up soon with the IV Corps troops advancing from Imphal.

The rapid advance of the 2nd Division had been greatly assisted by the operations of the 7th Indian Division. After capturing the Naga village in Kohima on 2 June, the 7th Indian Division started operations by sending numerous patrols as far afield as Thizama and Rekroma, but on 3 June these patrols found no trace of the Japanese. On 4 June, the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade sent 4/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles to Chakama and 4/14 Punjab concentrated at Chedema.<sup>22</sup> Left of it, 1/1 Punjab reached Rekroma without opposition. The advance was continued steadily on 5 June without any contact being made with the Japanese. By midday that day, 4/14 Punjab and 4/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles had reached Chakhabama picking up guns, mortars and other equipment abandoned by the Japanese in their hasty retreat. Extensive positions dug and prepared with the usual Japanese skill were also discovered in that area showing that the Japanese had originally intended to defend these positions. They had probably been abandoned due to the advance of the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade further east. Moving on, the forward companies of 4/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles met the Japanese rearguards at Kezoma on the morning of 6 June. Patrols were immediately thrown out and the battalion was concentrated for attack. Meanwhile 4/14 Punjab was advancing south from Chakhabama, and Headquarters 114th Indian Infantry Brigade with two batteries of the 25th Mountain Regiment came up in support. The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade was also following up, and by the

<sup>22</sup> War Diary of 7th Indian Division.



evening of 6 June 1/1 Punjab was located near milestone 10 and 4 Royal West Kent was placed at milestone 6 on the Jessami track. 4/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles attacked Kezoma during the night of 6/7 June and occupied the locality early in the morning of 7 June. Its patrols, following hard on the heels of the retreating Japanese, encountered opposition only on reaching Kidima and Kekrima.

The latter was a village built high up on a hill commanding the road, and threatened the eastern flank of the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade. Giving the Japanese no time to dig themselves in, the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade quickly moved forward. Between 8 and 9 June, 4/7 Rajput captured Kekrima without opposition and its patrols established contact with the units of the 23rd L.R.P. Brigade in the same area, near milestone 20 on the Jessami track.<sup>23</sup>

On 10 June, the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade patrolled extensively around Kidima and Kekrima, respectively. The Japanese positions in these areas were subjected to intense artillery fire from the 25th Mountain Regiment and the 5.5" medium guns of the Corps artillery. But no major change took place in the situation on 11 and 12 June in the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade area. The Japanese opened artillery fire on Kezoma but the guns were silenced by the fire of Allied guns. Two companies of 2 S. Lan. Regiment attacked a Japanese position 400 yards south-west of Kidima, but returned unsuccessful after losing their way in the jungle in the dark, rainy night.<sup>24</sup> On the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade front, however, 1/1 Punjab passed through 4 Rajput in Kekrima and captured three small hills on the north side of the track, about three miles east of Kekrima.

On 13 June, patrols were sent by 4/14 Punjab to by-pass Kidima and reconnoitre the Japanese positions at Oukrophoku. Threatened by this manoeuvre to encircle them, the Japanese evacuated Kidima and retreated to Oukrophoku. Hence on 14 June, 2 S. Lan. Regiment occupied Kidima against slight resistance, and on the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade front Thepfezuma was occupied by a company of 4 Rajput. Patrols could find no Japanese troops in Khezha Kenoma, nor could any Japanese be seen as far as milestone 26 on the Jessami track. The Japanese were obviously retreating fast and were trying to avoid action before reaching their next defended positions. On 15 June also, they continued withdrawing. 2 S. Lan. Regiment consolidated its hold on Kidima village and 4/14 Punjab occupied Oukrophoku without opposition. Patrols on 15 June ranged up to Phosemei and Tsozipfemai. On 16 June, Headquarters 161st Indian Infantry Brigade and 4 Royal West Kent moved to milestone 28 on the Jessami track, and 1/1 Punjab occupied Thepfezuma; 4 Raj-

<sup>23</sup> War Diary of Headquarters 161st Indian Infantry Brigade.

<sup>24</sup> War Diary of 7th Indian Division.



put also occupied Khezha Kenoma and by that night its patrols reached the Tuphema—Kharasom track near RE 6544. On 17 June, the whole of 4 Rajput followed up and established a road-block on the Tuphema—Kharasom track in order to prevent the escape of Japanese units withdrawing from the main Kohima—Imphal road. The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade Headquarters and 4 Royal West Kent moved to RE 715472. 4/14 Punjab also captured Kisepvermei that day, which was only about a mile east of Mao Songsang, then being attacked by the 2nd Division. By this double threat, the Japanese as described earlier, evacuated Mao Songsang which was occupied by the 2nd Division on 18 June. By that day two battalions of the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade were astride the Tuphema—Kharasom track which was their important strategic objective as thereby Japanese withdrawal on the main road was made precarious. The success of the operation had blocked the last major route from the Kohima area eastwards for the Japanese.<sup>25</sup>

The task given to the 7th Indian Division had now been completed. Although it had encountered only minor resistance from small Japanese parties, the division had advanced through very difficult terrain. The monsoon had further accentuated its difficulties turning the steep mountain tracks into terrible quagmires of mud. The Kohima—Jessami track had always been considered usable only during dry weather and the maintenance of a full division by means of it during the monsoon presented many difficulties. The problem was solved by making use of all available jeeps and their trailers within the Corps. The jeep convoys carried supplies up to Chakhabama, forward of which only mules and porters could be used. Although from Kohima to Chakhabama was only 12 miles by the track, a jeep often took four hours to cover the distance. Land-slides further hampered the work and a number of jeeps were lost by sliding into the deep ravines. The engineers and pioneers put forth their best exertions to maintain the track in a passable condition. The fighting troops had also shown admirable dash and stamina in the face of serious difficulty. Hence it was now obvious that the 7th Indian Division could not keep pace with the 2nd Division which was advancing along a fine metalled road where every stream was bridged, while the 7th Indian Division had to struggle through steep hills and dense sodden forests with hardly a usable track in the whole area. The 7th Indian Division was, therefore, ordered to halt its advance and concentrate its units, maintaining at the same time patrols to the east and south-east of the main road. On 19 June, the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade less 4/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles began to move towards Mao Songsang. The 161st Indian

<sup>25</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps, p. 27.



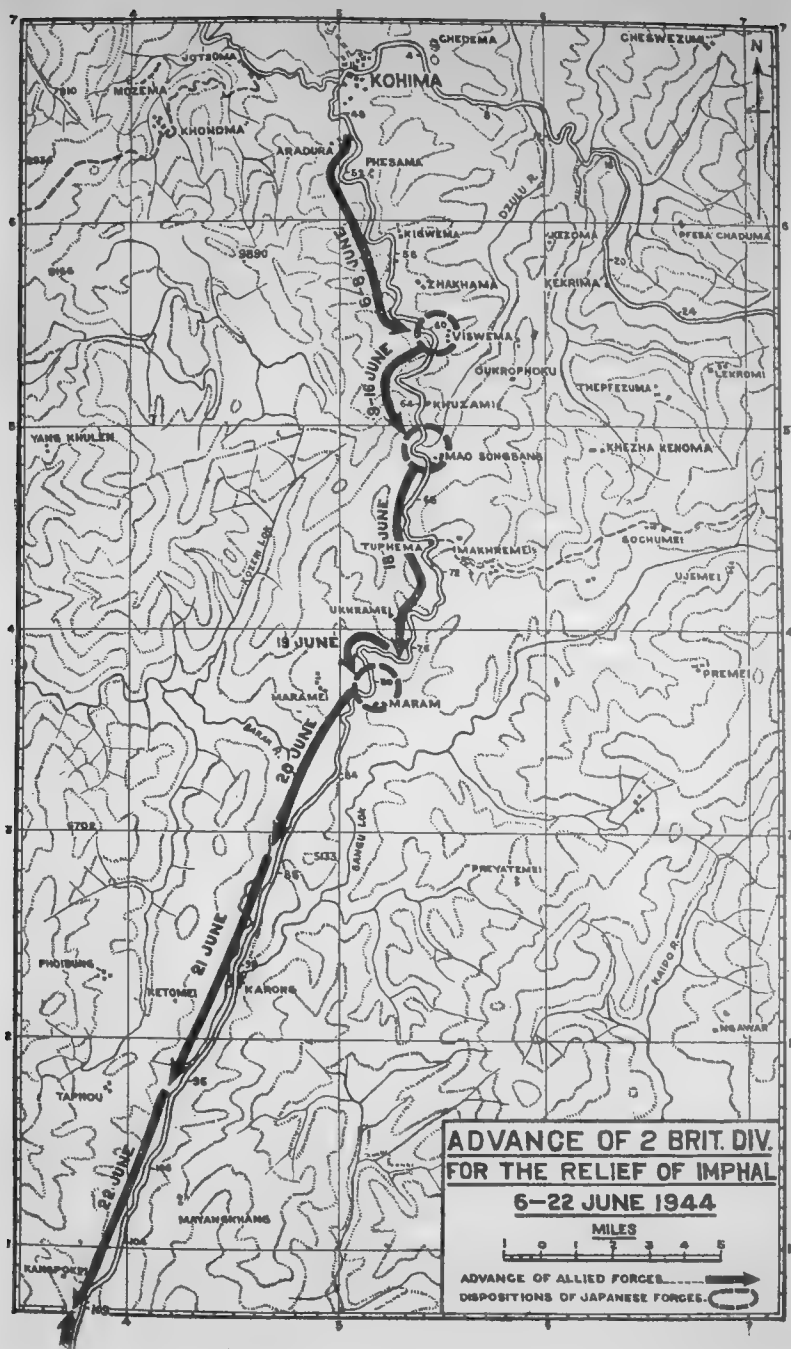
Infantry Brigade also began to move towards the main road in the Tuphema area, leaving one battalion to watch the Kharasom and Jessami tracks at milestone 72 and milestone 30 respectively. 4/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles remained at Makimei with orders to patrol south on the left flank of the 2nd Division. On 20 June, its patrols reached a small hill east of Maram.

As already described, the advanced units of the 2nd Division had reached milestone 77 by the evening of 18 June and were held up there by a broken bridge. By 0800 hours on 19 June, the bridge was repaired by the engineers allowing troops to advance again. Patrols of 1 Cameron and 7 WORC R had already espied some Japanese positions at Maram. Heavy fire was opened at them at 1000 hours by every available gun. A company of 2 Manchester swept the area with machine-gun fire, and 3" mortars fired salvoes against the position. Field guns also bombarded the area from very close range. With this terrific fire support and spearheaded by tanks, 7 WORC R attacked the Triangle Hill and the village situated to the east of the road.<sup>26</sup> To begin with, difficulty was experienced by the artillery in locating their own troops in the thick jungle till the advancing infantry used grenades emitting smoke to indicate their forward positions. The Triangle Hill was however soon captured, but some Japanese positions on the reverse slope of the hill then stopped the advance. The guns were again switched on to the new targets and Hurricanes came up to bomb and strafe the Japanese positions. A fighting patrol of 1 Cameron was also despatched to encircle the positions from the west while one company of 7 WORC R moved to the east to complete the encircling movement. By this manoeuvre the whole of Triangle Hill was captured within a few hours. A major road-block at milestone 80 was removed bodily by a bulldozer working behind a smoke-screen. By these means, Maram was captured within a day, although nearly a battalion of Japanese troops had entrenched themselves there.

The speed of the advance and the weight of the assault had evidently taken the Japanese by surprise. There is little ground for doubting the statement of a Japanese officer captured during the fighting that they had intended to hold up the Allied advance at Maram for ten days. But with the capture of Maram the Japanese lost all hope of prolonged resistance. Afterwards they made no real attempt to stop the overpowering advance of the 2nd Division. Early on 20 June, the 4th Brigade passed through the 5th Brigade units still holding Maram. In its advance, it met some mines and a road-block at milestone 82; but the mines only delayed the advance for a little while, and the IRS with the help of guns successfully

<sup>26</sup> Operations of XXXIII Corps.







overcame the road-block. The armoured column continued the advance taking by surprise some Japanese troops in the area between milestone 86½ and milestone 87. The Japanese defenders were forced to fly abandoning food, clothing, arms and ammunition. By that evening the Headquarters 4th Brigade with 2 Norfolk and 1/8 L.F. had reached milestone 86½ and had concentrated, within a small perimeter, tanks, lorries, armoured carriers and guns of all calibres. A few Japanese troops were detected in a small position less than 900 yards away and were dispersed by point-blank artillery fire without the infantry being required to attack them. On 21 June, the 4th Brigade continued the advance and reached Karong. During this advance 2 Norfolk captured almost the whole of the maps, papers and equipment of a Japanese divisional infantry headquarters. So complete was the Japanese debacle that they even failed to destroy the double-span bridge at milestone 92, which was captured intact by the advancing troops. The 4th Brigade then stopped to consolidate its gains in the area of Karong and the 6th Brigade passed through to continue the advance. By the evening it had reached milestone 97. As the dawn broke on 22 June, 2 DLI, 1 Squadron 149th Royal Armoured Corps and one troop 11 Cavalry continued the advance from milestone 97. They met only a few parties of disorganised and retreating Japanese troops south of the Kangpokpi bridge, which, of course, failed even to delay their advance. At 1030 hours on 22 June, this column at last met 7 Cavalry of the 5th Indian Division at milestone 109. The reopening of the Kohima—Imphal road was thus effected.

#### CONCLUSION

In its attack against Kohima and the Imphal road, the Japanese 31st Division suffered a disastrous defeat. Even in the beginning, it was little more than a gambler's throw. The Japanese columns had pierced their way through an extensive wilderness of hills and forests between the Chindwin and Kohima, cut the Imphal road and occupied almost the whole of Kohima. But there their success ended. The Allied commanders were dreading an attack on Dimapur itself, virtually undefended as it was at the beginning of April. If the commander of the 31st Division had left "a detachment to mask Kohima, and, with the rest of his division, thrust violently on Dimapur" the result would have been a staggering blow to the Fourteenth Army.<sup>27</sup> But at Kohima, the Japanese found themselves faced by fresh Allied troops in a numerical superiority and with far more powerful tank and artillery support. Placed on the defensive, the 31st Division fought stubbornly and well, earning the respect even

<sup>27</sup> Slim: *Op. cit.*, p. 311.



of its enemies. But it was a losing battle. It had bitten off more than it could chew. The division could not overcome the dogged resistance of the Kohima garrison, and was bled white in attack after attack. Allied guns and aircraft bombed and blasted the Japanese troops day and night. Japanese aircraft were rarely to be seen. When once a Japanese fighter appeared over Kohima, the troops came out of their bunkers and cheered it vociferously and the Japanese commander sent a special message of thanks to the air force. Even their guns, hauled up all the way from the Chindwin, ran short of ammunition and could fire only four or five shots per day. The downpour of the tropical monsoon added to their difficulties by washing away the tenuous tracks and spreading malaria and dysentery among the troops. The monsoon and the terrain hampered the operations of Allied troops also, particularly of the 7th Indian Division and the 23rd Long Range Penetration Brigade which had to advance through exceedingly broken mountains and swollen rivers, and with only mule tracks to carry their supplies.

The achievements of the Allies would have been quite impossible without the absolute air supremacy maintained and enjoyed by the Third Tactical Air Force. Allied aircraft not only supplied the ground troops but also gave decisive support to them by strafing and bombing Japanese strong-points. Moreover, tanks of the Royal Armoured Corps and the 5.5" guns of the Medium Artillery proved of immense effectiveness against the strongly constructed Japanese bunkers. In spite of all these aids, however, the reconquest of Kohima and the reopening of the Imphal road within three months would not have been possible without the dash and stamina and skill displayed by the infantry soldier. His task it was actually to capture and hold each bunker and tunnel. The Japanese hung on to their posts to the bitter end, making the attacks singularly savage and bloody. But the XXXIII Corps troops captured all their objectives, inflicting shattering losses on the Japanese in the process. During the period from 3 April to 23 June, the *31st Division* lost 3384 men killed in battle, 3931 men wounded, and no less than 87 captured alive. At the same time seven 75-mm and eleven 70-mm guns were captured by the units of the XXXIII Corps. These battle casualties, added to the ravages of disease and starvation, decimated the ranks of the Japanese *31st Division* and almost destroyed its offensive capacity. Its bold bid to capture Kohima and carry the war into India proper was decisively defeated.

The defeat of the *31st Division* around Kohima, together with the failure of the *15th Division* and *33rd Division* to capture Imphal meant that Japan's last and greatest offensive against India had been thrown back. The three Japanese divisions had set out in March, full of hopes of capturing Imphal and destroying the IV Corps. In



June they were thrown out from their most advanced positions and their siege of Imphal was broken. Their enemy faced them in greatly increased numbers. They themselves, on the other hand, had suffered shattering losses, losing about 4,000 of their number in the town of Kohima alone. The Allied troops had counted 13,500 dead Japanese on the various sectors of the front, and there must have been thousands more who died by air attacks or by their wounds. Disease and hunger again claimed many victims, for the Japanese had organised no adequate supply services for their advancing troops hoping to subsist by capturing Allied supply dumps. When they failed to capture major supply dumps, they tried belatedly to rush forward munitions and food across the Chindwin. But the Allied air forces foiled these attempts by intensifying bombing and strafing of all communications, motor transport and barges. As a result, the commander of the 33rd Japanese Division, Lieut. General Tanaka, himself had to live for several weeks on roots of plants, while many of his superb soldiers died of starvation.<sup>28</sup> According to conservative Allied estimates, the Japanese lost at least 30,000 men between mid-March and mid-June.<sup>29</sup> According to their own admission, their total casualties in the offensive were no less than 65,000 men, made up as follows<sup>30</sup> :—

<i>Formation</i>		<i>Strength before the attack</i>	<i>Strength after their failure</i>	<i>Casualties</i>
15TH DIVISION	...	20,000	4,000	16,000
31ST DIVISION	...	20,000	7,000	13,000
33RD DIVISION	...	25,000	4,000	21,000
REAR UNITS	...	50,000	35,000	15,000
TOTAL	...	115,000	50,000	65,000

After shattering losses, beaten on the ground and harried from the air, the Japanese had no option left except to withdraw sullenly back to the Chindwin.

While these battles for Imphal and Kohima were being fought out west of the Chindwin, another violent struggle was taking place to the east of the river between the Japanese and the Jungle Commandos of the 3rd Indian Division. These operations, planned and conducted by Major-General Orde Wingate, formed an integral part of the Allied plan for the reconquest of Burma. It is necessary, therefore, to relate their story before proceeding with the account of plans and operations which led to the final reconquest of Burma.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, footnote No. 1, page 73.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> History of Japanese Fifteenth Army, South-East Asia. Translation and Interrogation Centre, Bulletin No. 245.



## CHAPTER XVI

# The Special Force Operations—Planning

### WINGATE AT QUEBEC

Even before the first Wingate expedition<sup>1</sup> was over and its various columns had been able to extricate themselves from the east bank of the Irrawaddy, Field Marshal Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief in India, had planned to raise a second Long Range Penetration Group, which would be in a position, after full and strenuous training, to undertake operations behind the Japanese lines in Burma by early 1944. This idea found confirmation at the Washington Conference in May 1943, when it was decided to use Long Range Penetration Groups as part of the general plan for operations in Upper Burma in 1943-44. The primary object of these operations was to reopen a land route to China running from Ledo via Myitkyina to a point near the China-Burma border, where it would link up with the old Burma Road. This end was to be attained by organising well co-ordinated thrusts from two sides, the Ledo-Imphal area on the one, and Yunnan on the other. The Long Range Penetration Groups were to be an essential and integral part of the plans for the reconquest of Burma, as their latent possibilities had been well demonstrated during the first Chindit operations.

Towards the end of July 1943, Brigadier Wingate was asked to report in person to Mr. (now Sir) Winston Churchill on the utility of Long Range Penetration Groups. Immediately after landing at an airport in England, he met Mr. Churchill and dined with him in "the clothes he was wearing—slacks and travel-stained tropical bush-shirt." After a long discussion, Brigadier Wingate was able to win Mr. Churchill's support to his idea of sending a second Long Range Penetration force into Burma on a considerably larger scale, with improvements suggested by the lessons learnt during his first expedition. He wished to exploit a new method of a two-way air supply. He had analysed the factors which were responsible for the failure of his first attempt in 1943. He knew that if his troops had been initially flown in and had built and held air-strips inside Burma for evacuating the sick and the wounded, some of his major problems would not have arisen.

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the first Wingate expedition, see Chapters V to VIII.



From the United Kingdom, Brigadier Wingate accompanied Mr. Churchill to Quebec for a conference with the American Staff Officers, and there he had the benefit of American experience. At the Quebec Conference (August 1943) his views on the employment of Long Range Penetration Brigades in northern Burma, as a spearhead producing favourable circumstances for the advance of the main Allied forces, met with the approval of the Combined Chiefs of Staff.

His suggestion found favour with Lord Louis Mountbatten also who had been appointed Supreme Commander of the South-East Asia Command. The Brigadier had captured the imagination of the Supreme Commander who recorded: "I had been greatly impressed (when I met him for the first time on our way to Quebec) by his firm conviction, based on his experience behind the Japanese lines in 1943, that the Japanese could be beaten in jungle-fighting; and I now encouraged him to continue expanding his technique of air transport into the jungle."<sup>2</sup> With Lord Mountbatten's backing, it became easy for him to secure the support of the War Cabinet and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, although the Commander-in-Chief did not see eye to eye with him.

The plan generally approved at Quebec was:—

(1) the capture by Long Range Penetration forces of the Katha-Indaw area which would then be held by a division, flown in or moved overland across the Chindwin, with light equipment;

(2) the capture of Mogaung-Myitkyina by Chinese/American forces from Ledo with possible exploitation southwards; and

(3) an advance on Bhamo-Lashio by Chinese forces operating from Yunnan.<sup>3</sup>

Wingate returned to India about the middle of September 1943 with the nucleus of a staff to control and command the Long Range Penetration Brigades which were thereafter to be known as Special Force. Later, the force worked under the security title of the 3rd Indian Division while operating in the Fourteenth Army area.

#### FORMATION OF SPECIAL FORCE

The Special Force comprised six Long Range Penetration Brigades. As early as February 1943, Field Marshal Wavell had ordered the formation of a second Long Range Penetration Brigade (later known as the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade) which was to be trained and equipped on the same lines as the first Wingate expedi-

<sup>2</sup> Mountbatten's *Report*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Giffard's *Despatch*, op. cit.



tion. By April the new brigade, commanded by Brigadier W. D. A. Lentaigne, had commenced training in Central India. In August, Brigadier Lentaigne's force was joined by the re-formed 77th Indian Infantry Brigade under the command of Brigadier J. M. Calvert, which contained almost all the survivors of the first Wingate expedition. The two brigades had been in training for some time near Jhansi, when it was decided, as a result of the Quebec Conference, to form a Long Range Penetration force of six brigades in the first instance and to increase these to eight later on.<sup>4</sup> Each brigade was to consist of eight columns, each three hundred and forty strong. The bulk of the troops came from the 70th British Division, which was split up into three independent brigades—14th, 16th, and 23rd. These three brigades, in addition to the two already there, moved to the training area soon afterwards. The sixth brigade to join the force was the 3rd (West African) Brigade, consisting of only three battalions, which arrived in India on 4 November 1943, and went into training by the middle of the month.

In addition, a special United States Air Task Force arrived in India in November-December 1943 to join the Special Force. This unit, to be integrated with the ground troops, was created by General Arnold, the Chief of the U.S. Army Air Force, on the initiative of Lord Louis Mountbatten, who had persuaded him at the Quebec Conference to do so. Lord Mountbatten did not wish to repeat the debacle of 1943 and was not prepared to have a long range penetration operation under his command without adequate air support and means of getting the wounded back out of the jungle. Hence he sought United States' support and thereby introduced the system of air force integration in South-East Asia. The new unit was called No. 1 Air Commando, presumably as a tribute to Lord Mountbatten who had commanded the British Commandos in combined operations. This unit was commanded by Colonel Philip Cochran of the United States Air Force with Lieutenant-Colonel R. Allison as his deputy commander, and played an all-important part in the operations of the Special Force. It had been formed for the specific purpose of assisting the fly-in of the force, maintaining it by air, evacuating casualties and providing the direct air support necessary to compensate for the lack of heavy artillery in the Special Force brigades. Of the close support provided by the Air Commando Force, General Slim, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Fourteenth Army, afterwards wrote:—

"The co-operation between the infantry columns of the Special Force and the fighter bombers of this Air Commando was as nearly perfect as anything can be in war."

<sup>4</sup> Auchinleck's *Despatch*, 21 June 1943—15 November 1943, p. 25.



## TRAINING

The arrival of the 3rd (West African) Brigade in Central India during November 1943 completed the concentration of the Special Force brigades in the training area to the south and south-east of Jhansi. Meanwhile, headquarters of the force had opened at Gwalior on 25 October for the training, organisation and administration of the brigades and later for their operational control as required by the South-East Asia Command. The personnel for this headquarters were mostly drawn from the 70th Division and from the United Kingdom. There was some inevitable delay in the setting up of this headquarters because the Commander, General Wingate, was stricken with typhoid fever contracted on his journey out from the United Kingdom, and the responsibility of forming the Special Force Headquarters fell on Brigadier Tulloch.

By early November, each brigade had been, or was in the process of being, reorganised on a four battalion basis instead of the usual three. It was one of Wingate's theories that it was a major mistake to work in "threes" (*i.e.* 3 battalions to a brigade, 3 brigades to a division etc.). War-time problems, he maintained, "demanded a quadrilateral rather than a triangular solution" particularly in infantry fighting where "four separate groups are almost invariably needed to solve a given tactical problem."

Later in November 1943, the six brigades under training were joined by 3,000 American officers and men of the 5307 Composite Unit (Provisional), popularly known as "Merrill's Marauders" after its commander Brigadier-General Frank Merrill. At Deogarh, south of Jhansi, they were trained in long range penetration principles under the supervision of General Wingate. This American force, however, never operated as part of the Special Force.

From the very first, the training of both the 77th and the 111th Indian Infantry Brigades was conducted on the basis of experience gained by the former formation in the campaign of early 1943. Valuable lessons in supply-dropping and jungle-fighting had been learnt, but training for the operations scheduled to take place early in 1944 embraced a far wider range of subjects with the result that many months were spent in evolving various drills for the transport of personnel and the construction of air-strips, strongholds and road-blocks. A number of training memoranda, most of which were written personally by General Wingate, were published. These formed the basis of all training which took place within the force.

In order that training and the development of the tactical use of new weapons in jungle-warfare might be carried out systematically, a Training and Experimental Wing was set up in October 1943. All new weapons and new ideas were thoroughly examined at the wing.



and the results were widely distributed throughout the Special Force. Thus, in addition to the various training memoranda, each brigade possessed up to date instructions on the proper tactical use of the weapons with which they were to fight the Japanese.

During training, the greatest attention was paid to morale and instilling in the men confidence in the leadership of their immediate superiors. The following points were emphasised by Brigadier Calvert while training the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, and they may be taken as typical of those brought out in training throughout the Special Force:—

- (i) Every officer or non-commissioned officer must always account for every man of his command, alive or dead.
- (ii) If in doubt, attack the enemy.
- (iii) If an enemy is inadvertently seen, no man will be wrong who shoots at him.
- (iv) We are only cautious and move warily as a tiger is cautious when he is stalking his prey. At other times we must be the King of the Jungle and behave as such, never take more precautions than are necessary.
- (v) "To gain much you must risk much."<sup>5</sup>

During December 1943, a large-scale exercise was carried out by the two Indian infantry brigades in which the problems of air supply and direct air support were fully investigated and satisfactory solutions arrived at. Hitherto, little progress had been made with these problems owing to non-availability of aircraft for the purpose of practice.

By Christmas 1943, the 77th and 111th Indian Infantry Brigades and the 16th Brigade of the 70th British Division, all earmarked for the first phase of the operations, had completed their training with such weapons as were available. In January 1944, these three brigades moved by road and rail from the Jhansi training area to the Fourteenth Army operational area. Several new weapons, including "Lifebuoy" flame-throwers and "Piat" projectors were received at this time, and last-minute training in their use was hurriedly attempted. Close co-operation training with light planes and Mustangs was carried out by the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade in the Silchar area.

In February 1944, the Force was ready to begin operations and by this time its various headquarters were located as follows:—

Main Headquarters—Gwalior

Rear Headquarters—Comilla (near the headquarters of the Fourteenth Army and 3 Tactical Air Force)

Advance Headquarters—Imphal.

<sup>5</sup> *Report on Operations of 77th Indian Infantry Brigade*, 5 March-1 August, 1944, p. 2.



In view of the impending Japanese offensive on the IV Corps front, General Wingate prepared a detailed plan for the withdrawal of his Advance Headquarters to Sylhet from Imphal.

#### PRELIMINARY PLANS

As has been related earlier, the Allied plans of operations in Upper Burma were modified and changed repeatedly during 1943 and the early months of 1944. This was perhaps inevitable, since plans had to be constantly revised in keeping with the changing tactical situation on the Indo-Burma frontier. Moreover, Allied strategic needs in other theatres of war could not but affect the course of operations in Burma. On 27 April 1943, the Joint Planning Staff (London) laid down the policy that Allied effort in Burma should be kept to "a minimum", because of the difficulties of the terrain and the ravages of malaria. Since necessary resources for the capture of the whole of Burma were not available, they visualised only limited operations from Imphal in December 1943. An Allied force with a strength of only three divisions plus one Long Range Penetration Group was earmarked to carry out operations against the Japanese in Burma, and the entire force was to be withdrawn on the approach of the monsoon. The primary object of the Allied force was to cover as far as possible the development of the supply-route to China and increasing the flow of supplies.<sup>6</sup>

By the time the Washington Conference was held, it had been accepted by the Joint Planning Staff of the War Cabinet "that Long Range Penetration Groups should be used as an essential part of the plan of conquest (in Northern Burma) to create a situation leading to the advance of our main forces." Later, in August 1943, at Quebec, General (then Brigadier) Wingate was able to persuade the American and British Chiefs of Staff of the soundness of his scheme for a second Long Range Penetration expedition into northern Burma. He asserted that he should be given at least three Long Range Penetration Brigades to harass the Japanese and destroy their line of communication; while three more should be held in reserve.

The Quebec Conference had laid down the directive that land and air operations in Upper Burma during 1943/44 should be carried out with the object of capturing the whole of that area in order to improve the air route and establish overland communications with China. The target date for the start of operations was to be mid-February 1944. With a view to finding ways and means to fulfil this policy, the Joint Planning Staff met on 31 August 1943, and the result of their deliberations was circulated as Joint Planning

<sup>6</sup> JPS (London) Paper No. 165, p. 3.



Staff Paper No. 94. On account of administrative and political difficulties, the Joint Planning Staff envisaged that not more than three Chinese divisions would be deployed southwards from Ledo, and that no Chinese advance from Yunnan was expected unless the British forces attacked in strength from Imphal. They held that the object of operations from Imphal must be:—

- either (a) to sever and keep severed the Japanese northward line of communication leading to the Kamaing-Myitkyina area ;
- or (b) to maintain such a threat against this line of communication as to contain Japanese forces and prevent resistance in force to the advance of the Chinese from Ledo to Yunnan.

While planning to achieve these objects the Joint Planning Staff relied on the assumptions that:—

- (1) the Chinese from Yunnan would advance in strength to occupy the Lashio-Bhamo area ;
- (2) the Chinese from Ledo would advance and secure the Myitkyina area.<sup>7</sup>

Plans of operations in Upper Burma were further considered on 25 September 1943, by the Joint Planning Staff in consultation with the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Army, and Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Bengal. They also took into account General Wingate's recommendations regarding the employment of Long Range Penetration Groups in Upper Burma. The Committee decided that it was possible to carry out the policy laid down at Quebec by the Combined Chiefs of Staff provided that:—

- (1) The Chinese forces based on Ledo and Yunnan made an attempt to carry out in full their share of the operations.
- (2) The full total of air transport squadrons (reaching a maximum of twenty-three in April 1944) together with an adequate maintenance organisation and the necessary reserves of aircraft and spares, were made available.
- (3) The highest priority was given to the making up and training of the parachute brigade in two complete jungle-trained battalion groups.
- (4) Long term projects unconnected with the immediate land and air operations were ruthlessly prevented from competing for personnel and tonnage lift on the Assam line of communication.

In addition to these, the Joint Planning Staff were of opinion that if one British Long Range Penetration Brigade consisting of 3,600 men could be flown to Paoshan in China and maintained by

<sup>7</sup> JPS Paper No. 94, p. 2.



air, it would "materially assist the plan".<sup>8</sup> The brigade was earmarked to advance in mid-February 1944 towards Lashio and Gokteik and to engage Japanese forces stationed in its vicinity until Chinese forces had been able to secure the Bhamo-Lashio area.<sup>9</sup>

According to Joint Planning Staff Paper No. 107, the conception of operations in Upper Burma was:—

- (a) The capture and retention by British forces of the Katha-Indaw area, astride the main Japanese rail and river communications to the north. Forces in this area to be supplied during the monsoon by air.
- (b) The capture and retention of Myitkyina by Chinese/American forces from Ledo.
- (c) The capture and retention of Bhamo-Lashio by Chinese forces from Yunnan.
- (d) The advance of the main forces to these objectives to be preceded and assisted by the operations of Long Range Penetration forces..

It was anticipated that three British and one American Long Range Penetration Brigades would be employed as in paragraph (d) above. They would commence operations about mid-February 1944, and advance simultaneously across the Myittha, Chindwin and Salween rivers. One British Long Range Penetration Brigade was to undertake operations from Chittagong' via Haka area towards Gangaw-Pakokku, while another brigade would operate from Homa-lin area towards Katha and cut the Japanese lines of communication to Myitkyina. The third British brigade was to be flown to Pao-shan and from there advance against the Bhamo line of communication and Gokteik. The American brigade was also to operate from Paoshan towards Lashio at the same time.

Outline plans for operations in Burma as laid down in Joint Planning Staff Paper No. 107 were further examined on 2 October 1943, by the Joint Planning Staff. Lack of transport aircraft, however, led to the abandonment of the idea of flying Long Range Penetration Groups to Paoshan<sup>10</sup> while the impossibility of obtaining information about the airfield at Indaw aggravated the difficulties of the planners. Thus the plans decided on 25 September 1943, for the most part came to nought, and planning had to be considered anew.

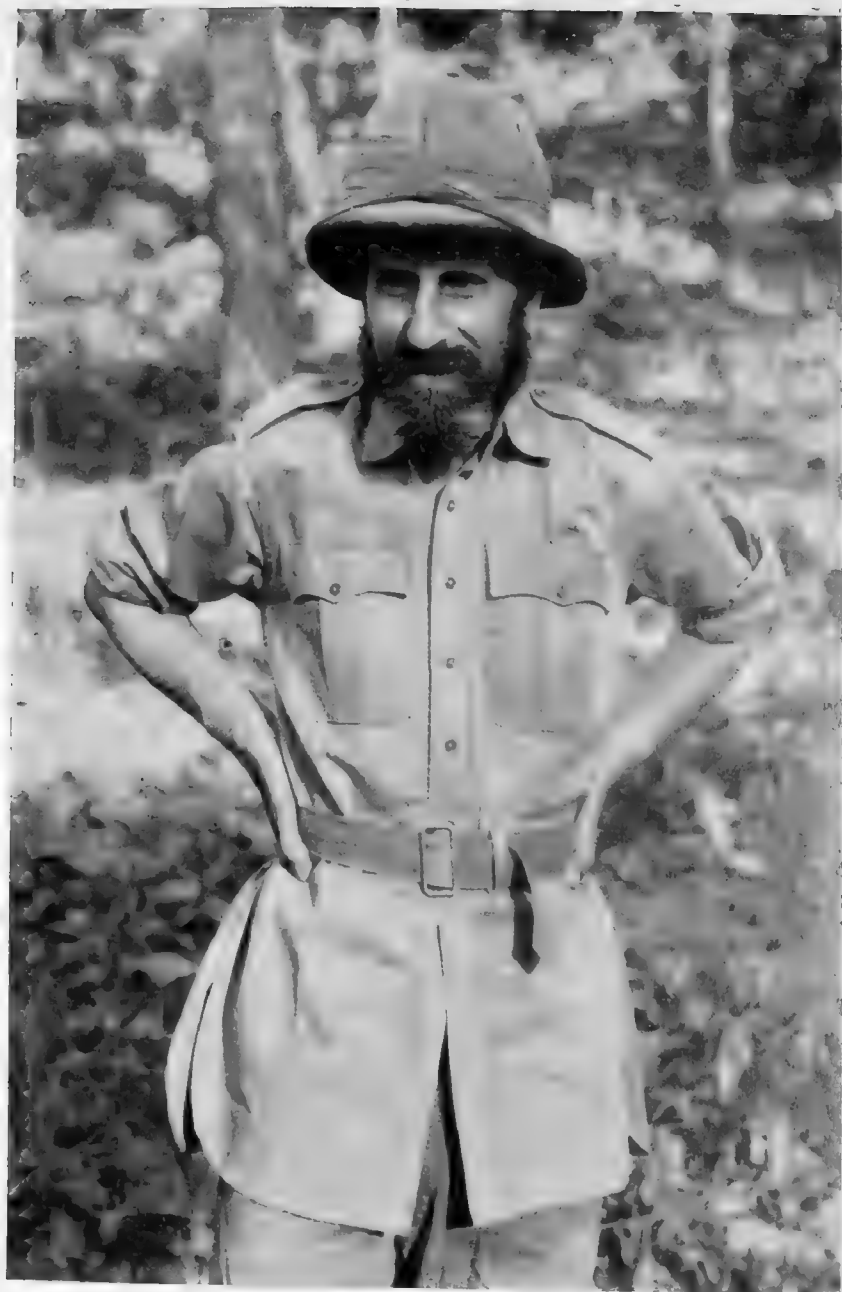
In a directive issued by the British Prime Minister on 23 October 1943, to Lord Mountbatten, it was stated that his prime duty was to engage the Japanese "as closely and continuously as possible in order by attrition to consume and wear down the enemy's forces, especially

<sup>8</sup> File No. 329(A), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Appendix 'E' to JPS Paper No. 107.

<sup>10</sup> JPS Paper No. 109.





Major-General Orde C. Wingate, D.S.O.



SOME VICTORIA CROSS WINNERS



Rfn. Ganju Lama, M.M.  
1/7 Gurkha Rifles



Naik Agan Singh Rai  
2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles



Subedar Netrabahadur Thapa  
2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles



Havildar Gaje Ghale  
2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles



his air forces." Secondly, but of equal importance, the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia Command, was asked "to maintain and broaden our contacts with China, both by the air route and by establishing direct contact through Northern Burma *inter alia* by suitably organised, air-supplied ground forces of the greatest possible strength."<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Lord Mountbatten formally took over charge as Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia Command with effect from midnight 15/16 November 1943, and his presence on the spot led to the speedy formulation of plans regarding operations in Upper Burma. Several related operations had already been approved at the Cairo Conference in November 1943, but the withdrawal in December of a part of the amphibious fleet and the refusal of the Generalissimo to carry out his part of the bargain, caused Lord Mountbatten to review all the plans. Several alternative plans were examined and rejected before General Sir George J. Giffard submitted his final plan of operations in North Burma to the Supreme Allied Commander in December 1943. This plan stipulated for:

- (a) An advance down the Kabaw valley towards Kalewa-Kalemmyo; the construction of an all-weather road via Tamu, as far as possible towards Yuwa and Kalewa on the Chindwin.
- (b) The use (initially) of three Long Range Penetration Brigades in the Katha-Indaw area.

This plan was then referred by the Supreme Allied Commander to the Chiefs of Staff. It depended for success entirely on road construction and on overcoming strong Japanese defences in the Tiddim area. When, at the end of January, the Chiefs of Staff were told that it was not possible to reach the Kalewa-Klemmyo area before the monsoon, the plan had to be considerably modified. Eventually, the entire plan was abandoned because of the Japanese offensive launched during March 1944,<sup>12</sup> which has been already described.<sup>13</sup>

By Christmas 1943, the 16th British and the 77th and 111th Indian Infantry Brigades had completed their training in Long Range Penetration tactics. It was originally planned that these three brigades should enter Northern Burma by land in advance of the main Allied thrusts from the Ledo, Imphal, and Arakan areas. Early in 1944, however, with the three brigades in their concentration area, doubts were entertained as to whether more than one brigade could successfully cross the Chindwin and enter Burma by march-route since the Japanese were closely watching every major crossing place on the Chindwin, in anticipation of a second Wingate

<sup>11</sup> Directive by Prime Minister in Appendix C, Mountbatten's *Report*, p. 226.

<sup>12</sup> Giffard's *Despatch*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapters XI to XV.



expedition. The possibility of flying one brigade to Paoshan in China from where it might enter Burma from the east, had been seriously considered by General Wingate. But this idea, though advantageous, in that it would reduce the number of brigades entering from the west, was not pursued.

With the arrival of No. 1 Air Commando in fulfilment of General Arnold's promise to Lord Mountbatten in Washington, a limited number of transport aircraft and gliders had become available for the initial fly-in of the troops of the 3rd Indian Division. Towards the end of January 1944, Wingate worked out a plan of operations in consultation with Lieutenant-General Slim and Major-General Stratemeyer. As a result of these discussions, it was decided to lift two brigades (77th and 111th) by air into their operational areas in Burma, early in March 1944, while the 16th Brigade would march in, as previously arranged, from Ledo. At a later stage, it was considered practicable to fly-in two more brigades, if necessary, to reinforce the original troops. "Troop Carrier Command, working in conjunction with No. 1 Air Commando, was to be responsible for flying in the main body of the force and subsequently maintaining it in the field, and Strategic Air Force was to give indirect support, by bombing enemy communications and concentrations during critical periods."<sup>14</sup> In addition it was decided that 221 Group of the Third Tactical Air Force was to assist the operations of Long Range Penetration Brigades as far as their other commitments permitted them. In view of the confusion likely to be caused by a variety of commands, Air Marshal Baldwin was appointed as Major-General Stratemeyer's representative to co-ordinate all air operations.

Detailed plans were worked out regarding the operations to be carried out by the first two brigades and subsequent troops. The plan was to land them well away from the Japanese lines of communication. The two sites selected for the air-borne landings were situated to the north-east of the Irrawaddy bend above Katha. On arrival, the brigades would each build a "stronghold", covering a fair-weather Dakota strip, to which it would retire for rest and re-organisation during the course of a prolonged operation. The stronghold would be garrisoned by an infantry battalion, supported by field and anti-aircraft artillery, and would form the base from which all operations would be launched and all casualties evacuated. A Floater Company, provided by the garrison, would man weapon pits covering the air-strip and patrol the immediate neighbourhood of the stronghold. Floater Columns would patrol to within a radius of ten miles of the stronghold and air-landing strip.

With the broad operational plan decided upon, detailed plan-

<sup>14</sup> Mountbatten's *Report*, p. 36.



ning discussions commenced at a Brigade Commanders' conference, held at Advance Headquarters Imphal on 31 January and 1 February 1944. Sufficient artillery for the three strongholds had been allotted to the 3rd Indian Division by the Fourteenth Army, but only one battalion—3/9 Gurkha Rifles from the 26th Indian Division—could be made available for garrison duties. General Wingate, therefore, determined to reserve the three battalions of the 3rd (West African) Brigade, the least trained in Long Range Penetration tactics, for the stronghold defence and they were consequently reorganised for this purpose.

#### FINAL PLANS

On 4 February 1944, in accordance with Lord Mountbatten's overall directives, the Fourteenth Army and the Eastern Air Command issued a joint Operation Instruction listing the tasks of the 3rd Indian Division, in order of importance as follows:—

- “(a) to help the advance of Lieutenant-General Stilwell's forces to the Myitkyina area by drawing off and disorganising the enemy forces opposing them, and prevent the re-inforcement of these enemy forces ;
- (b) to create a favourable situation for the Chinese Expeditionary Force to advance westwards from Yunnan across the Salween ; and
- (c) to inflict the maximum confusion, damage and loss, on the enemy forces in Northern Burma.”<sup>15</sup>

To implement these objectives, General Wingate decided to employ his troops in such a manner as to compel the Japanese to withdraw from all areas in Burma, north of the 24th parallel, i.e. north of the line Tamu-Nankan-Bhamo-Mengma. This could best be achieved by converging on Indaw with the 16th Brigade, and the 77th and the 111th Indian Infantry Brigades, with a view to cutting effectually the road and railway running north to Mogaung and Myitkyina. If this were achieved, the Japanese communications with their *31st* and *18th Divisions* would be served. It was also proposed to garrison Indaw with a normal infantry division, and it was anticipated that the garrison would be maintained throughout the monsoon from what was believed to be an all-weather air-strip at Indaw. The brigades of the 3rd Indian Division were to be withdrawn during June 1944 just before the outbreak of the monsoon in Burma. By that time it was confidently expected that the infantry division would be firmly based on Indaw. Should the general situation not permit of a whole garrison division being flown into Indaw, General Wingate was prepared to leave the 14th and

<sup>15</sup> See Mountbatten's *Report*, p. 36 ; and *Report on Operations of Special Force* (Oct. 1943 to Sept. 1944), p. 3.



23rd Brigades and the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade to carry out this task.

These plans had again to be considerably modified due to the exigencies of war. When Indaw airfield was captured, it was discovered that it was no more than a fair-weather strip incapable of improvement either before or during the monsoon. Moreover, the brigades originally earmarked to undertake garrison duties in Indaw were then fully occupied elsewhere.

The month of February 1944 was mainly spent in detailed planning, the production of aircraft loads and movement schedules, the training of troops in loading gliders and aircrafts, and the selection of suitable airfields and landing grounds. During this month, the 16th Brigade, commanded by Brigadier B. E. Fergusson, D.S.O., began marching from Ledo towards its objective in Northern Burma. The following instructions were issued by the Commander, 3rd Indian Division, on 2 February 1944:—<sup>16</sup>

- (a) From its concentration area around Ledo, the 16th Brigade would march south, cross the Chindwin on or about 18 February 1944, in the neighbourhood of Ningbauga and proceed quickly towards Haungpa.
- (b) During the period 1-10 March, three or four columns would attack Lonkin, which, if captured, would be garrisoned by only one column. It was anticipated that this attack would attract Japanese forces from Mansi, Yebawmi and Kamaing. The remainder of the brigade would continue its march towards the Banmauk and Meza areas and would be able to concentrate around Meza bridge by 25 March.
- (c) En route to Indaw, the commander was instructed to reconnoitre sites suitable for establishing strongholds, in case he should want to occupy them either then or at a later date.
- (d) Indaw would not be approached from the north and west. Should the brigade succeed in taking Indaw, a stronghold would at once be established in the immediate neighbourhood of the town. Garrison troops would be flown in.

These plans were later slightly modified as a result of the extremely hard going, west of the Chindwin, which caused some delay in the commencement of operations. On 29 January a party of about 200 men was sent ahead to clear a path to Hkalak Ga and Kulun, south-south-east of Ledo. But, despite all their efforts, the route was still inconceivably difficult when the 16th Brigade set out early in February.

<sup>16</sup> 3rd Indian Division Operation Instruction No. 1.



On 2 February 1944, the day on which the 16th Brigade received the orders given above, preliminary instructions were also issued to the 77th and 111th Indian Infantry Brigades. Final orders were issued to all the three brigades on 28 February 1944, by which time leading troops of the 16th Brigade had reached the Chindwin near Singkaling Hkamti. These were briefly as follows:—

### *16th Brigade*

The brigade commanded by Brigadier B. E. Fergusson, D.S.O., was ordered to reach the immediate neighbourhood of Banmauk not later than 14 March. It was suggested that a point few miles north of Manhton would be highly suitable for establishing a stronghold for the brigade, which would be in a position to dominate the Banmauk area and invest Indaw from the east, thereby assisting the operations of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade. Thereafter, the 16th Brigade was to "forbid the enemy possession of the areas Indaw, Naba and Banmauk by the use of road-blocks and strongholds with floaters and other Long Range Penetration methods."<sup>17</sup> A force of not more than two columns was to be diverted to the attack on Lonkin. The object of the attack was to assist the advance of General Stilwell's forces. The brigade was instructed to use the Meza valley route since it fitted in best with the general situation. General Wingate concluded his orders to the brigade with the words: "Be strong and very courageous".

### *77th Indian Infantry Brigade*

The task allotted to the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade under Brigadier J. M. Calvert, D.S.O., was that of cutting all rail, road and river communications of the Japanese 18th Division between the parallels 25° and 24° north (i.e. between Hopin in the north and Bon Chaung in the south). To accomplish this task, the brigade was to be put down by air on three separate landing grounds, two of which—"Broadway" and "Piccadilly"—were situated to the west of the Irrawaddy, forty to fifty miles north-east of Indaw; while the third—"Chowringhee"—was situated to the east of the Irrawaddy in the Shweli river bend.

It was proposed to establish a stronghold at "Piccadilly" from where the main body of the brigade would operate against the road and railway running north from Indaw and

<sup>17</sup> 3rd Indian Division Operation Instruction No. 2, dated 28 February 1944.



against shipping on the Irrawaddy. The garrison of the stronghold was to consist of 3/9 Gurkha Rifles, one troop field artillery and one troop of 40-mm (Bofors) anti-aircraft guns. 4/9 Gurkha Rifles (111th Indian Infantry Brigade) was placed under command of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade during the initial phase of the operations. This battalion, after landing at "Chowringhee", was to proceed north-east to block the Japanese communications south of Bhamo. The operations of this battalion were to be assisted by Dah Force which was later to move to the Kachin country east and north of Bhamo; in this area, the commander of this force had spent about six weeks during the first Wingate expedition. The primary object of Dah Force was to organise a Kachin revolt on the widest scale possible against the Japanese in the area Sinlum Kaba northwards to Sima Pa, and to establish a stronghold, if necessary, at the latter place. Under its direction, small parties were also to carry out harassing tactics on the Myitkyina-Bhamo road.

### *111th Infantry Brigade*

The task assigned to the brigade commanded by Brigadier W. J. A. Lentaigne, D.S.O., was clearly set out in the 3rd Indian Division Operation Instruction No. 4. To the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade (less 4/9 Gurkha Rifles) was given the task of severing the Japanese road and rail communications between Wuntho and Indaw. This task was considered to be the most difficult in the first phase of operations, as the Japanese were expected to react violently to any attempt to establish blocks on this vital line of their communications. The brigade was thus likely to bear the brunt of all attempts made by the Japanese to reopen their communications from the south.

It was planned that the brigade should be flown to "Broadway" and "Piccadilly" shortly after the initial fly-in of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade in the period 10-13 March. Upon landing, the brigade would at once march south-west, cut the road and railway in the region of Bon Chaung, and construct a stronghold and landing strip in the neighbourhood of Dayu (SC 4913); it was considered that this area was most suitable for maintaining columns north of the Nankan railway station. One battalion of the 3rd (West African) Brigade, which would fly in with the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade would garrison the stronghold. If necessary, the brigade was later to be assisted by light plane



patrols who were to be put down by glider in area Okshitkin and two or more columns of the 14th Brigade. The latter were to attack the railway south of Kyaikthin under the command of Brigadier Lentaigne. Road and rail blocks to be established by this brigade were to be on a lighter basis than those of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade.

To sum up, General Wingate was given the task of drawing off Japanese troops of the *18th Division* facing General Stilwell's forces, north-west of Myitkyina, and of preventing reinforcements from reaching them by cutting all their lines of communication. With a view to achieving these tasks, he gave detailed instructions to the 16th, 77th and 111th Brigades, as outlined above. Two more brigades (14th and 23rd) were held in readiness to consolidate gains made by the other brigades, or if necessary, to provide the garrison which, it was intended, should be retained at Indaw.



## CHAPTER XVII

# Special Force Enters Burma

### ALLIED FORCES

It may be recalled that in the winter of 1943/44 the Allied forces were in contact with the Japanese forces on three major land fronts: the Arakan front; the Northern Burma front, which the Americans called the Northern Combat Area Command; and the Central front which included Assam. The combat area in Assam lay between the Arakan Hill tracts and the Chin Hills in the west, its eastern boundary being the line Mawbe—Taro—Wakching. The IV Corps comprising the 17th, 20th and 23rd Indian Divisions defended the approaches to Manipur from the south and east, and was at the same time poised for an offensive action across the Chindwin into Upper Burma.

#### *Stilwell's Force*

On the Northern Burma front, an American/Chinese force under Lieutenant-General Stilwell was operating from Ledo. This force, known originally as Chinese Armies in India, consisted of the 22nd and 38th Chinese Divisions equipped and trained in India and was joined later by the 30th Chinese Division. The 22nd and 38th Chinese Divisions were commanded by Major-General Liao and Major-General Sun Li-Jen, respectively. General Sun had graduated from the Virginia Military Institute and was later promoted to command the Chinese New First Army.<sup>1</sup> The main objective of this force was "the open lowland of north-central Burma, where the meter-gauge railway wound its way through the linked towns of Mogaung and Myitkyina".- If these two towns were captured, the construction of an overland route to China via Ledo and Myitkyina would be covered and the existing air route to China might be made secure against Japanese interference.

Soon after the close of the monsoon in 1943, General Stilwell's force started moving south from Ledo. His first objective was the capture of Shingbwiyang and the establishment of a bridgehead over the Tanai river, and by mid-February he was to advance to Shaduzup in the Hukawng valley. With a view to facilitate the task of road-construction, great emphasis was laid on the time-factor and the

<sup>1</sup> *The Stilwell Papers* ed. Theodore H. White, New York (1948) p. 272.



force had clear instructions to move as quickly as possible down the valley after negotiating the Patkai Hills, which divide the Brahmaputra valley from the headwaters of the Chindwin. By the end of December 1943, the force was well established in Shingbwiyang, which henceforth became the main Allied headquarters in northern Hukawng valley. In the wake of this Allied army followed the United States engineers who pushed the road over the Patkai Hills to Shingbwiyang, a distance of one hundred miles from Ledo.

On 8 January 1944, the Long Range Penetration Group commanded by Brigadier-General Merrill (Galahad Force), originally meant to form part of Wingate's force, was assigned to General Stilwell at his own request. Brigadier-General Merrill's force was earmarked for a medium-range penetration role to assist the advance of the Chinese forces by carrying out "hooks and outflanking movements." A further addition was made to the troops under General Stilwell's command when the Fort Hertz detachment was put under him with effect from 1 February 1944. By the end of February 1944, General Stilwell's force was astride the Kamaing road in its drive towards Maingkwan in the Hukawng valley. In spite of stiff resistance by the Japanese *18th Division*, utilising to the full the natural defence provided by dense, evergreen forests, General Stilwell with a force of about 50,000 Chinese troops had advanced nearly 60 miles in the Hukawng valley.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout February and March 1944, the Chinese forces, assisted by large-scale and continuous air support, continued their southward advance against the Japanese *18th Division*. The scope of the operations was, however, restricted in view of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's decision not to commit the Yunnan force<sup>3</sup> to operate in Northern Burma. For ultimate success in breaking the Japanese ring round Northern Burma, General Stilwell fully realised that a complementary advance by the Yunnan force under Brigadier-General Dorn was essential. In view of the calling off of this operation, it was felt that "all hope of opening the land route to China during 1944 must be abandoned."<sup>4</sup>

### *Long-Range Penetration Brigades*

It has been mentioned earlier that the final plan of operations of the Special Force had kept the assistance to General Stilwell's forces as their first object, and the help was to be best rendered by drawing off and disorganising the Japanese forces and creating a favourable situation for the advance of the Chinese armies. This

<sup>2</sup> *The Stilwell Papers*, p. 269.

<sup>3</sup> In the first week of February 1944, the Yunnan force consisted of forward formations of Chinese 11th Group and 20th Army Group which were aligned on the east bank of the Salween river.

<sup>4</sup> Mountbatten's *Report*, p. 35.



force was primarily designed for the object which General Stilwell had in view and by its diversionary tactics would have helped the drive of his force towards Mogaung and Myitkyina, the capture of which would eventually open the land-route to China. The force had the bayonet strength of two infantry divisions, and in addition to the six brigades mentioned above, it had four troops of the 150th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery and four troops of the 69th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery.

From his experience behind the Japanese lines during 1943, General Wingate was convinced that it was physically impossible for any man to fight continuously in Burma for more than two or three months. In order to continue operations undeterred by the monsoon, he had originally planned to divide the 3rd Indian Division into two groups, each consisting of three brigades. The three brigades to enter Burma initially were the 16th British and the 77th and 111th Indian Infantry Brigades, which had completed their training by the end of 1943, and which had moved into the Fourteenth Army area early in 1944. The other three brigades were held in reserve to relieve the three brigades sent initially. This plan, however, was later modified as Lieutenant-General Slim decided to fly in the 3rd (West African) and the 14th Brigades early in April 1944. The detailed composition of these brigades will be found in the Order of Battle, 3rd Indian Division. (Appendix 9).

### *Air Support*

Troop Carrier Command, in conjunction with No. 1 Air Commando under Colonel Cochran, was assigned the task of flying in the main body of the 3rd Indian Division, and subsequently maintaining it in the area of operations. The Strategic Air Force was responsible for bombing Japanese lines of communication and troop concentrations with a view to helping Long Range Penetration Groups to capture their objectives, while 221 Group of the Third Tactical Air Force was also to offer co-operation wherever possible.

At the commencement of operations in February 1944, Colonel Cochran's air force consisted of 30 Mustang fighters, 100 light communication planes, 25 Constellation and Dakota transports, 12 Mitchell medium bombers, 150 Waco gliders and 4 helicopters. The whole force was based on aerodromes in the Hailakandi-Rajyeshwarpur area, south-west of Silchar.

### JAPANESE TROOP DISPOSITIONS

Japanese forces in South-East Asia were under the command of Field Marshal Count Terrauchi, "former Minister of the Army and



member of the Japanese Supreme War Council",<sup>5</sup> who had his headquarters in Singapore. His headquarters was responsible for all strategy and operations and for the military administration of occupied territories. In November 1943, the Japanese strength in Burma was five infantry divisions totalling about 130,000 men. Between November 1943 and January 1944 reinforcements arrived in Burma continuously and at the end of this period the Japanese troops comprised two armies of eight divisions, and one additional mixed brigade, bringing the total number of troops to nearly two lakhs. These forces were under the control of two Army Headquarters: the *Northern (Fifteenth) Army* consisted of forty-four battalions with headquarters at Maymyo; and the *Southern*, thirty-two battalions.<sup>6</sup>

Early in February 1944, Japanese *Fifteenth Army* dispositions in Northern Burma were as follows:—

- (1) The *18th Division* (55th, 56th and 114th regiments) led by Lieutenant-General Tanaka Shinichi was opposing the advance of General Stilwell's Chinese force. The 55th and 56th Regiments were disposed over the Taro-Hukawng valley-Mogaung area. The 114th Regiment defended the area Sumprabum-Myitkyina-Sadon-Hpimaw. The division had its headquarters at Shingban near Kamaing, but tactical headquarters was never far from the front throughout the operations.<sup>7</sup>
- (2) The *56th Division* (148th, 146th and 113th Regiments) with headquarters at Mangshih was responsible for the whole of the Salween area.
- (3) Two regiments of the *31st Division* were disposed in the area Pinlebu-Pinbon, while the *33rd Division* was in the Kale and Kabaw valleys and Lower Chindwin. Two regiments of the *15th Division* occupied positions between the *31st Division* in the north and the *33rd Division* in the south.<sup>8</sup>

#### ADVANCE OF THE 16TH BRITISH BRIGADE

In the plan of operations prepared for the 3rd Indian Division, the 16th Brigade was the only one which had to march from Ledo in Assam into Northern Burma; the other two brigades were to be flown into the area of operations. The concentration of the 16th Brigade in the Ledo area was completed by 27 January 1944. The

<sup>5</sup> Mountbatten's Report, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Giffard's Despatch, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Short History of Japanese 18th Division, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> In May 1944, a fresh Japanese Division, the 53rd, came from Japan via Malaya and was located in the Mogaung area.



task allotted to it was to march to Indaw area in the shortest possible time, and with the minimum interference by the Japanese.

Brigadier Fergusson, the Brigade Commander, who had commanded No. 5 Column in the first Wingate expedition, sent out two patrols to reconnoitre certain routes leading south to the Hukawng valley. At this time General Stilwell's forces were engaged in crossing the Chindwin near Shingbuiyang, and it was not considered possible for the 16th Brigade to cross in the same area without meeting opposition from the Japanese. In the Dalu valley, Japanese patrols were adequately guarding Taro and, although their estimated strength did not exceed one battalion, they could easily thwart any attempt to use the track over the Tasu Bum to Lonkin. After a series of reconnaissance flights over the entire area and collecting as much information about the tracks leading south from Ledo as they could, it was decided to use the Ledo Road, short of Tagap, and cross into the upper Dalu valley just below Hkalak Ga. Thereafter the 16th Brigade was to cross the mountains and reach the Chindwin in the neighbourhood of Singkaling Hkamti; then crossing the Chindwin, it was to march quickly to the Indaw-Banmau area. General Stilwell made mechanical transport available for the troops upto Tagap, but the mules had to walk from Ledo.

A small advance party consisting of about two hundred men left the roadhead near Tagap on 29 January in an endeavour to prepare the track to Hkalak Ga and Lulum, held by the Chinese. The party got the track ready for the march of the 16th Brigade by building bridges etc. under appalling weather conditions, and on short rations. But for this pioneer work, "the march to the Chindwin would have taken twice the time."

The first columns to leave the roadhead on 5 February were those of 2 Queens and they started off on their errand in continuous, pouring rain. The gradients were often one in two with not a single stretch of level ground extending more than a hundred yards. Under these trying conditions, the columns on an average took nine days to cover the thirty-five miles from roadhead to Hkalak Ga. The first supply-drop for the columns on a small natural clearing was far from satisfactory. Between forty and fifty per cent dropped down the cliffs and was a dead loss. The columns received supply-drops almost daily after they reached Hkalak Ga, which has been described as "a secure fort".

At Hkalak Ga where the columns rested for a couple of days, reports were received that the track up to Lulum was good. The march to Lulum, thereafter, took four days, and the going was satis-



factory. The columns did not encounter any Japanese posts on the way which presumably had all been withdrawn to the south.

From Lulum, the columns continued their weary march to the Chindwin over very difficult country, which was almost trackless and mostly uninhabited. Leading troops of the 16th Brigade reached the Chindwin on 28 February, where they waited for the entire brigade to assemble. When the commander joined his columns, he was told that a wireless message had been received from General Wingate. It read:

"Well done, Leicesters, Hannibal eclipsed".<sup>10</sup>

General Wingate, accompanied by Colonels Cochran and Cave, flew to the Chindwin for a conference with the brigade commander. Some minor modifications in the plan of operations were made, but the broad features remained substantially the same. It was anticipated that the brigade would assemble in the Banmauk area about 15 March, and it was asked to cut the Japanese lines of communication before launching its attack on Indaw, then scheduled to take place in the second or third week of April.

By 5 March, the crossing of the Chindwin was successfully completed near Singkaling Hkamti with the help of rafts and rubber dinghies dropped by No. 1 Air Commando, and the brigade reached Haungpa on 10 March without contacting the Japanese.

As previously arranged with General Stilwell, two columns, 51 and 69 of the 16th Brigade, carried out a diversionary attack on Lonkin from the Haungpa area. These columns moved via Hwehka and occupied Lonkin on 16 March, almost without casualties; the place had been abandoned by the Japanese garrison, who probably thought that the whole brigade was destined for Lonkin. All stores, including large quantities of rice, found in or near the place were destroyed by the columns, before they withdrew on the evening of 17 March to rejoin the brigade.

From Haungpa, the main body of the brigade reached Manhton area on 19 March after by-passing Indawgyi Lake. On the way, there were two minor patrol clashes in the neighbourhood of Shwedon. A few days earlier, on 13 March, acting under instructions from General Wingate, the brigade commander had carried out a reconnaissance of the area by light plane with a view to finding out possible sites, suitable for establishing strongholds. The Kalat area, at the junction of the Meza river and the Kalat Chaung, was found to be suitable for this purpose and the actual site was finally chosen by General Wingate on 20 March. It lay immediately north of the village of Manhton and eventually became known as "Aberdeen." This stronghold was to be utilised by both the 16th Brigade and 111th Indian Infantry Brigade, and in addition was

<sup>10</sup> *The Wild Green Earth*, p. 57.



intended to act as a reception centre for the landing of the 14th Brigade. Six gliders flew into the place at first light on 22 March, with plant and personnel for building the air-strip, and the next day the fly-in of the 14th Brigade and the remainder of the 3rd (West African) Brigade to "Aberdeen" started.<sup>11</sup>

Thus by 20 March, the 16th Brigade had successfully completed its "arduous trek of over 400 miles."<sup>12</sup> At this time the 16th Brigade was so disposed that of the two Leicester columns, 71 was at "Aberdeen", while 17 was one day's march east of the stronghold. Brigade headquarters and 22 Column of the Queens were in the stronghold area, while 21 Column was not far from it. The 45 and 54 Columns of the 45th Reconnaissance Regiment were two days march from "Aberdeen", while the two other columns which were returning from Lonkin to rejoin the 16th Brigade were at least 10 days' march away.

During General Wingate's last visit to the brigade, plans for an attack on Indaw had been fully matured. The main attack, to be carried out by four columns, was to proceed along the Kyagaung ridge and thence down into Indaw. One column was to block the Banmauk-Indaw road to prevent Japanese reinforcements from the west reaching the area, while a second column was to attack Indaw from the south-east.

In the meantime, the fly-in of the 77th and 111th Indian Brigades had been successfully completed at "Broadway" and "Chowringhee", which will be related below.

#### OPERATION "THURSDAY"

The fly-in of the 77th and 111th Indian Infantry Brigades into Upper Burma, planned under the code-name of operation "Thursday" was based on the experience acquired during the first Wingate expedition. The location of every landing ground and the entire information on which the plan was based, was obtained almost solely as the result of enquiries made on that occasion. The plan followed a novel principle: instead of putting down the airborne troops in the immediate neighbourhood of airfields, the method adopted was that of establishing new airfields and strongholds, which were to be located in areas where the Japanese were not in force, and could not be so for a considerable time. In the 1943 operation, the sick or seriously wounded had little chance of escape, and they had to be left behind to the mercy of the Japanese. This serious drawback was now sought to be rectified by the decisions taken at the Quebec Conference. It was decided to evacuate the sick and the wounded, during 1944, by a light air ambulance service to be

<sup>11</sup> Narrative of Operations, 16th Infantry Brigade, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Mountbatten's Report, p. 49.



run by a Special Air Commando Group. Colonel Philip Cochran was selected to lead this group, and on 22 January 1944 it was brought under the operational control of Air Marshal Baldwin, commanding the Third Tactical Air Force. Colonel Cochran and General Wingate between themselves took all major decisions. Later, the pair became known in the India-Burma theatre as "The Wing and the Beard."

As stated earlier, it was planned to introduce about 10,000 men and 1000 pack animals far behind the Japanese armies with a view to severing the main arteries of supply of the Japanese troops opposing General Stilwell's Chinese forces. Three air-strips—"Broadway", "Piccadilly" and "Chowringhee" situated in the triangle Mogaung—Indaw—Bhamo, were specially chosen for the landing of troops. A Combined Force Headquarters was set up at Lalaghat on 27 February for the purpose of controlling the operation and 5 March 1944 was fixed as D Day.

For several weeks before operation "Thursday" was to be launched, Allied planes had been employed in raids on Japanese concentrations and lines of communication, north and south of Indaw. Air attacks were also delivered on the Mandalay and Rangoon areas so that the Japanese might be misled into the belief that the Allies were about to launch an airborne operation against Mandalay. But these had not the desired effect and the Japanese made no change in their plan of invading India. The raids were intensified in March, and, on the 4th, the Allied Air Force scored its first notable success in a raid on Anisakan airfield, seventy miles east of Mandalay. With no loss to themselves, the Americans destroyed twenty-six Japanese aircraft on the ground and one in the air; two more planes were probably destroyed and a few others damaged.

Some diversionary measures were also carried out to create confusion in the Japanese mind. A glider landed a patrol near the Chindwin to divert Japanese attention from the 16th Brigade's real intentions on the night of 28/29 February. Spitfires successfully prevented Japanese reconnaissance aircraft from discovering Allied moves, while long-range fighters carried out devastating raids on the airfields in Burma.

### *The Fly-in of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade*

On D Day (5 March 1944) the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, which was to be the first brigade to land by air in Japanese-occupied Northern Burma, was assembled at the airfields of Hailakandi and Lalaghat. The brigade at this time comprised<sup>13</sup>:—

<sup>13</sup> Narrative of Operations, 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, pp. 5-6.



<i>Striking Force</i>	<i>Column Nos.</i>
Brigade headquarters (including one platoon Hong Kong Chinese volunteers)	...
1st Lancashire Fusiliers	... 25
1 South Staffords	... 20 and 50
3/6 Gurkha Rifles	... 38 and 80
	... 36 and 63
<i>Stronghold Garrison Force</i>	<i>Column Nos.</i>
3/9 Gurkha Rifles.	
One platoon Chinese volunteers	
1st Kings—"Floater" battalion	... 81 and 82
53 Indian Observation Unit.	
One Troop Field Artillery.	
One Troop Light Anti-Aircraft artillery.	
Attached: US Light Plane Force	
US Engineers	
US Ground Control	

*Also Under Command the 77th Brigade*

Dah Force (Lt.-Col. Herring)	<i>Column Nos.</i>
4/9 Gurkha Rifles—later known as "Morris Force" (Lt.-Col. Morris)	... 49 and 94

On 5 March while the advance units of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade were boarding their gliders in preparation for the take-off at Lalaghat airfield, there occurred an unexpected incident "which for dramatic value is possibly unparalleled in the story of the war",<sup>14</sup> threatening the success of the whole operation. For several days prior to the date of the fly-in, in order not to attract the attention of the Japanese to the proposed landing grounds, no reconnaissance planes had flown over the areas in which the landings were to be accomplished. Not until the afternoon of 5 March did Colonel Cochran send out reconnaissance aircraft to ensure that both "Broadway" and "Piccadilly" were still clear. The photographs brought back were printed at 1630 hours, which was only an hour before the take off. On examination one of the prints showed quite clearly that "Piccadilly", the chief landing-strip in which a Dakota had landed in the first Chindit expedition to evacuate casualties, had been blocked by felled trees and hidden by buffalo grass so that high flying planes had not been able to see the obstructions.

As the officers pored over the print, fears were expressed by some of them that the design of operation "Thursday" might somehow have become known to the Japanese. The only redeeming feature in an otherwise ominous setting was the fact that other photographs showed that "Broadway" was clear. The officers, however, were not sure whether the Japanese were laying an ambush at

<sup>14</sup> *Wings of the Phoenix*, (His Majesty's Stationery Office) London, 1949, p. 57.



"Broadway" having made "Piccadilly", "a death-trap for gliders." General Wingate was faced with two alternatives, either to land the entire force at "Broadway" or postpone the operation by 24 hours. The Army Commander, General Slim, however, decided that the operation must not be postponed. General Wingate, thereupon, directed the Air Officer, Commanding 3rd Tactical Air Force, to concentrate all gliders on "Broadway". The officers concerned thought that the Japanese knew about "Piccadilly" from a photograph which had appeared in "Life" magazine, and their action was just a routine precaution. The effect on morale of a postponement was also given due consideration.

Colonel Cochran was given the delicate task of breaking the news of the change in plan to the air crews, but he performed it admirably. To the pilots, who were briefed for "Piccadilly", he said: "Look boys, we have found a better place to go to—Broadway." The landing on "Chowringhee" was scheduled for the following night.

The first tug aircraft, towing two gliders, took off from Lalaghat at 1812 hours. "Bouncing, swaying, and straining, the aerial train rushed down the strip in a whirlwind of dust, hauled itself up over the trees, and set forth over the 8000-foot mountain barriers for the heart of enemy-held Burma." Thus the greatest airborne adventure of World War II, before the invasion of Europe, began. The tugs continued taking off at four and a half minute intervals in bright moonlight. Weather conditions were excellent for flying and Brigadier Calvert and the commander of the Kings both landed successfully with the first wave of four gliders. A command post was at once set up and the "floater" battalion sent out patrols in all directions to secure the neighbourhood around the landing area. No contact was made with the Japanese.

Gliders, in the meantime, continued to land for more than four hours after the initial landings. Things, however, began to go wrong from the very beginning. Some of the nylon ropes shredded and broke and the tug pilots had no alternative but to abandon their missions, and in extreme cases had even to cut the gliders adrift. Of the 61 gliders which took off, thirty-five discharged their loads at "Broadway" safely, eight landed prematurely in friendly territory, while nine others landed in hostile territory. Two crashed on the air-strip, while eleven were turned back by a signal from those who had already landed at "Broadway" because of heavy congestion. Most of the gliders which landed on the air-strip were damaged. Thirty-one men were killed and thirty wounded on or near the air-strip. The accidents to the gliders were mostly due to the undulations on the ground, and the heavy loads. The maximum load permissible was 4,500 lbs., but some gliders were loaded up to 6,000 lbs.

It may be mentioned that the nine gliders which had cut loose



over hostile territory considerably helped in deceiving the Japanese about the real purpose of the operation. Operation "Thursday" had no deception plan worthy of the name, since it was doubtful until the last moment whether the operation would take place or not. "Parting of the double two ropes of gliders resulted in the depositing of two glider loads each in the immediate neighbourhood of *31st Divisional Headquarters*, and *15th Divisional Headquarters*, and three in that of the *Regimental Headquarters* in the Paungbyin area."<sup>15</sup> The Japanese were probably misled into believing that a large-scale commando division was being put against them to frustrate their advance, due in a few days against the IV Corps; consequently, for the first four invaluable days they took no counter-measures. When it finally came, it was too late. Lord Mountbatten has, however, recorded that it was subsequently learnt from Japanese sources that they fully appreciated Allied intentions, and realised that Allied landings were designed:

- (a) to cut the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway and isolate the *18th Division*;
- (b) to compel the diversion of troops from the central front; and
- (c) to consolidate a base behind his lines in central Burma for future operations on a large scale.<sup>16</sup>

At the "Broadway" air-strip that night, there was much confusion. Many gliders came in much too fast and three crashed into the trees beyond the landing ground; others telescoped into gliders which, having landed only a few minutes earlier, had not yet been cleared from the strip. In spite of these accidents 350 men landed safely.

Seeing the chaotic state of affairs in the landing area, the commander of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade decided to cancel the second wave of gliders, which was on its way, and at 0227 hours on 6 March, he sent out the prearranged code-word, "Soyalink" to the air base to stop further landings. This message was received and acted upon, but General Wingate did not know whether the strip was closed because of ambush, as had been feared, or for other reasons. He, therefore, passed some very anxious moments, while all attempts to contact "Broadway" in the remaining hours of darkness were of no avail.

Meanwhile, the American airfield engineers, in spite of the death of their commanding officer, had begun work on the air-strip. They succeeded in their task by using bulldozers, scrapers and jeeps, and the strip was made ready for receiving Dakotas by the evening

<sup>15</sup> Major-General Wingate's covering letter to Report on operation "Thursday" dated 19 March 1944, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Mountbatten's *Report*, p. 50.



of 6 March. At about 1100 hours, work on the construction of the air-strip had advanced sufficiently to enable the controller at "Broadway" to send the code-word "Pork-sausage" which signified that all was well and that the strip was securely held by the airborne troops. Later in the afternoon another message was sent from "Broadway" to say that Dakotas could also land there after dusk.

During the night of 6/7 March, the build-up of the troops on "Broadway" proceeded with great speed. Brig.-General Old himself piloted the first Dakota to land on the strip and Air Marshal Baldwin reached the place soon after. Advance parties of each battalion arrived during the night and altogether 62 Dakotas landed without any untoward incident. In a report on the night's work, Air Marshal Baldwin wrote:

"Nobody has seen a transport operation until he has stood at "Broadway" under the light of a Burma moon and watched Dakotas coming in and taking off in opposite directions on a single strip, at the rate of one take-off or one landing every three minutes."

On the morning of 7 March, Brigadier Calvert along with the commanding officer of 3/9 Gurkha Rifles selected a suitable site for the stronghold at "Broadway", which was to be manned by the Gurkha battalion with two troops of artillery while 1 Kings was to maintain patrols in the area.

For three more nights, units of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade continued to land at "Broadway". 87 Dakota sorties were made on 7/8 March, 82 on 8/9 March; the following night the last troops of the brigade were flown in.<sup>17</sup> No Japanese opposition had been encountered so far.

Dah Force, temporarily under the command of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, was flown into "Broadway" in three Dakotas between 0100 and 0200 hours on 12 March; originally it was intended to land this force by gliders on Templecombe, an air-strip about 2000 yards north-west of Paneng. The strip had actually been prepared by the engineers, but receiving no signal about this, General Wingate sent the force to "Broadway" instead.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Fly-in of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade*

The other brigade, the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier W. D. A. Lentaigne was originally intended to be flown-in to "Broadway" and "Piccadilly" as soon as both the areas had been secured by the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade. With the blocking of "Piccadilly", however, and the resulting congestion at "Broadway", the commander of the 3rd Indian Division decided on 6 March, to open the third strip, "Chowringhee" (named after

<sup>17</sup> 3rd Indian Division, War Diary (in chart form), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Lt.-Col. D. C. Herring, Narrative of Operations, Dah Force, pp. 1-2.



Calcutta's main street) to receive the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade, in addition to 4/9 Gurkha Rifles under command of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade.

At the time of the fly-in, the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade comprised:

		<i>Column Nos.</i>
Advance Brigade Headquarters	...	48
3/4 Gurkha Rifles	... ..	30 and 40
2 King's Own	... ..	41 and 46
1 Cameronians	... ..	26 and 90
6 Nigeria Regiment (Columns 39 and 66) of 3rd (West African) Brigade had been placed under command for garrison duties.		

On the night of 6/7 March, twelve gliders, carrying United States engineers and elements of 4/9 Gurkha Rifles, landed at "Chowringhee" without opposition. Only one mishap occurred when the glider carrying vital engineer equipment overshot the runway and crashed into the jungle. Its crew of three were killed and a bulldozer was destroyed. At noon the following day, a signal was sent to airbase that the strip was not ready for receiving Dakotas until another bulldozer was received. The equipment arrived in the evening of 7 March, and although seven Dakotas were able to land the same night, the strip was not actually completed until 8 March.

For two more nights, Dakotas continued to land on the new strip. In all, 120 Dakota sorties were made and the fly-in of the Brigade Headquarters, 3/4 Gurkha Rifles and 4/9 Gurkha Rifles (Morris Force) was completed. Since "Chowringhee" was vulnerable to Japanese attacks, General Wingate had issued instructions to abandon the air-strip as soon as its purpose was fulfilled. It was never intended to hold "Chowringhee" for any length of time as it was perilously near to Japanese air and ground forces, and, moreover, lay in a completely flat and open area of forest. With the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade firmly established at "Broadway", it was decided that the remainder of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade should also be flown there. The last troops to evacuate "Chowringhee" left at 0800 hours on 10 March, and five hours later, Japanese planes, making their first move against these airborne landings, bombed and strafed the vacated air-strip. The Japanese continued to attack "Chowringhee" for a couple of days more in the mistaken impression that it was the principal air-strip. On the night of 9/10 March, 41 Column (2 King's Own) was successfully landed at "Broadway". The remainder of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade, consisting of the second column of 2 King's Own, two columns of



1 Cameronians and the whole of 6 Nigeria Regiment, was landed at "Broadway" the following night.

Five hundred and eighty-one Dakota sorties had been made during the fly-in of the 77th and 111th Indian Infantry Brigades. Ten C.64s (Constellations) and fifty-three Waco gliders had also landed on the two air-strips and no irreparable damage had occurred to any of the transport planes during this operation. A total of over 9000 troops and 1100 pack animals had been carried to the "focal centre" of four Japanese divisions in Burma at the cost of only 120 casualties. Unlike the first Wingate expedition, when troops had reached the area of operations only after two months of weary marching, the troops on this occasion arrived fresh at their destination to carry out their allotted task against Japanese troops and their lines of communication. It was rightly claimed that "It was an achievement at that time unequalled anywhere in the world." Credit for the success of the operation goes mainly to the magnificent work of both the Royal Air Force and the United States air force formations, and in particular to No. 1 Air Commando. Without close air support the 3rd Indian Division would have failed utterly in its task.

On the successful completion of the landings of the two brigades, General Wingate issued the following Order of the Day on 11 March to the troops under his command:—

"Our first task is fulfilled. We have inflicted a complete surprise upon the enemy. All our columns are inserted in the enemy's guts. The time has come to reap the fruit of the advantage we have gained. The enemy will act with violence. We will oppose him with the resolve to reconquer our territory of Burma. Let us thank God for the great success He has vouchsafed us, and press forward with our sword in the enemy's ribs to expel him from our territory. This is not a moment when such an advantage has been gained to count the cost. This is a moment to live in history. It is an enterprise in which every man who takes part may feel proud one day to say I WAS THERE."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Plans in Burma, p. 55, File No. 7056.



## CHAPTER XVIII

# Operations Around Indaw

### COMMENCEMENT OF GROUND OPERATIONS

With the successful completion of operation "Thursday", ground operations were undertaken by the 3rd Indian Division. Of the forces that had landed at "Broadway", the tasks allotted to the battalions comprising the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade were as follows:—

- (1) The "striking force" of the brigade, consisting of Advance Brigade Headquarters, South Staffords and 3/6 Gurkha Rifles, was assigned the task of establishing a block at Henu to the north of Mawlu "White City". The two columns of 1 Lancashire Fusiliers, which also formed part of the "striking force" were to prevent the Japanese forces from moving to attack the block. 50 Column, after cutting the railway in Kadu area was to move to Mawhan from where it was instructed to attack the Japanese forces moving south. The other column (20) less 100 men was to attack the railway in Pinwe area to the south of the block and prevent the Japanese forces, moving north.
- (2) About 100 men with one medium machine-gun and one mortar under the command of Major Monteith were to move south from "Broadway" and to block all traffic on the Irrawaddy. These were later to be relieved by 81 column when it was in a position to leave the stronghold at "Broadway" safely.
- (3) Dah Force was assigned the task of organising the Kachins and was to set off east towards the Irrawaddy.

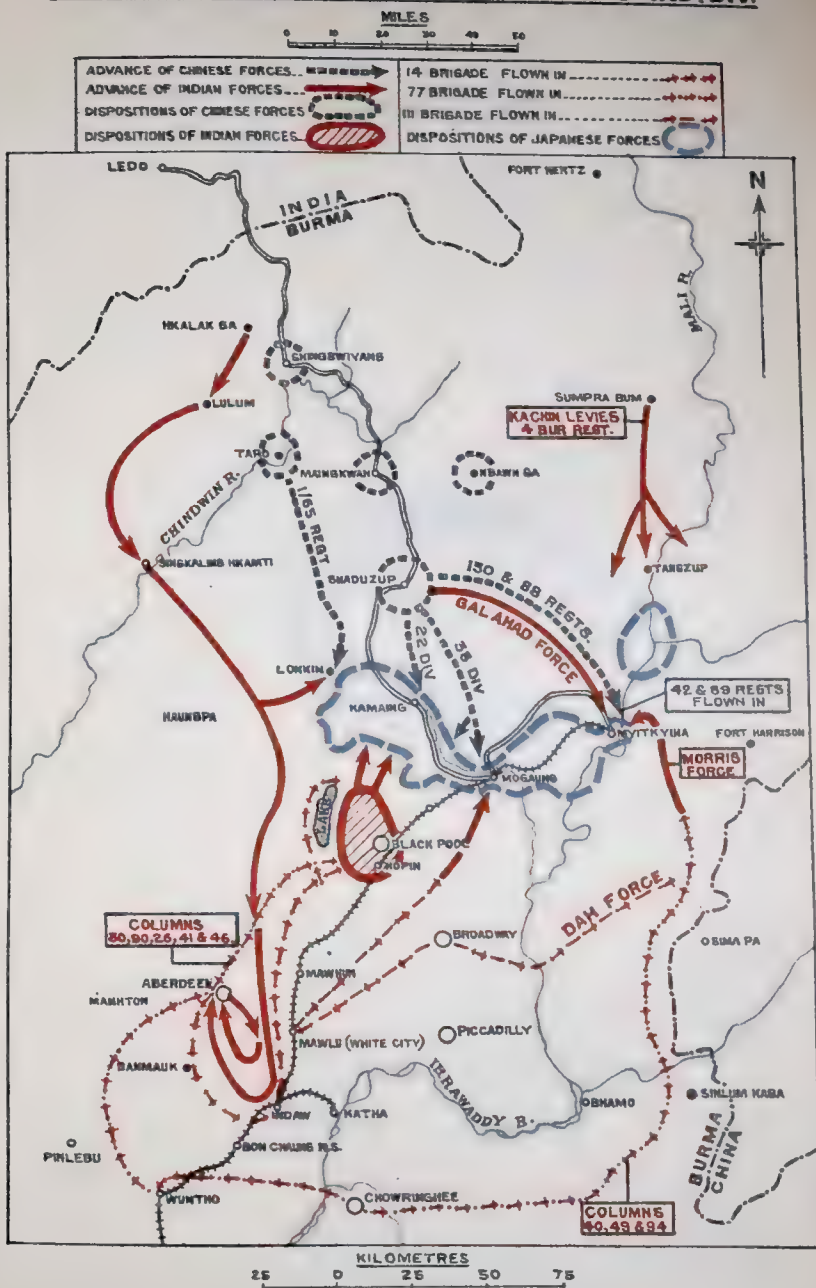
### FIRST ATTACKS ON "WHITE CITY"

The march of the "striking force" under Brigadier Calvert from "Broadway" was uneventful. The jungle was exceedingly dense and paths had to be cut through it for the columns. Brigade Headquarters moved faster and arrived at the top of the hill overlooking Mawlu twenty-four hours ahead.

On 16 March, 80 Column (South Staffords) established a block on the road and railway just north of Henu. This block, later named "White City", was situated 20 miles north of Indaw. Placed



# OPERATIONS CHINESE ARMIES IN INDIA & 3 IND. DIV.





as it was on the main line of communication to Myitkyina, it was destined to play a large part in the operations of the 3rd Indian Division, for weeks to come.

On the night that the block was established, it was attacked by the Japanese, and the attack was repeated on the following day (17 March). A few casualties were suffered by 80 Column but the attacks were beaten off without any difficulty.

On 17 March, 80 Column was joined by 38 and 63 Columns. Digging-in began at once but was at first hampered by a lack of tools, which were dropped by mistake at Hitpum, nearly eight miles away. On the night of 17/18 March, a commando platoon of 63 Column (3/6 Gurkha Rifles) laid mines on the road south of Mawlu.

At dawn on 18 March, two companies of Japanese troops put in a strong attack on the block from the south, and fighting continued throughout the morning. Meanwhile, the Brigade Headquarters and 63 Column had concentrated in the hills east of the block. Realising that an attack on the block was imminent, the Brigade Headquarters with five platoons of 63 Column moved towards Henu. The party arrived at 1300 hours and immediately attacked the Japanese from the rear. Another attack by 80 Column completed the discomfiture of the Japanese. Henu village was finally cleared with the help of "Lifebuoy" flame throwers. At least forty-two Japanese, including four officers, were killed in the course of this action, while Allied casualties amounted to 3 officers and 20 other ranks killed; 4 officers and 60 other ranks wounded.<sup>1</sup>

The "White City" block was "ideally situated around a series of "mole hills" with numerous little valleys in between, with water at the north and south extremities."<sup>2</sup> Henu village was brought within the southern part of the perimeter as well as a nearby hill, which gave a commanding view of the country around. On 19 March, in view of its excellent situation, Brigadier Calvert decided to set up his headquarters inside the block. At this time the garrison consisted of 3/6 Gurkha Rifles and 1 South Staffords, while 1 Lancashire Fusiliers was operating on the main line of communication to the north and south of "White City". 50 Column to the north had one or two minor brushes with the Japanese, honours being about even; while 20 Column at Pinwe frustrated an attempt by Japanese troops moving up from Katha in trucks to attack "White City". The column directed some Mustangs, which happened to be flying over, straight on Japanese troops, inflicting many casualties.

Probing attacks by night were now being put in by Japanese patrols. On 21 March, the "White City" garrison had its first en-

<sup>1</sup> *Narrative of Operations, 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 10.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11,



counter with a battalion of the *18th Division*. The following night (21/22 March) a heavier attack by three companies of the *3rd battalion* of the *114th Regiment (18th Division)* was made from the north of the block. The Japanese attack started at about 1845 hours with a fusillade of grenades. Confused close-quarter fighting continued throughout the night, and by dawn of 22 March the Japanese had occupied two small areas inside the block. A counter-attack, however, succeeded in dislodging them, and they were finally dispersed by Mustangs of the United States Air Task Force. 60 Japanese dead and 4 wounded were afterwards collected by the garrison, which itself had lost 6 officers, and 28 other ranks killed; and 6 officers and 36 other ranks wounded.

On 24 March, 50 Column blew the railway bridge just south of Kadu. Prior to the attack on Mawlu (27 March), the garrison had improved its defences, constructed a glider strip and had carried out intensive patrolling. Elements of both the *15th* and *31st Divisions* were identified by Allied patrols. It appeared, however, that these had merely been formed into a composite unit for the purpose of assisting the *114th Regiment* of the *18th Division*.

#### MOVE OF 111TH INDIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE FROM "CHOWRINGHEE" AND "BROADWAY"

While the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade had established a block at "White City" which the Japanese had failed to dislodge, the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade had concentrated at "Chowringhee" and "Broadway". The first problem facing Brigadier Lentaigue at "Chowringhee" was the crossing of the Irrawaddy. Brigade Headquarters with 30 and 40 Gurkha Columns began their march to the Irrawaddy at 0800 hours on 10 March with the intention of crossing on the night of 11/12 March in the neighbourhood of Inywa. Despite a successful supply-drop and the landing of four gliders containing river-crossing stores, great difficulty was experienced in getting the animals across the river. This was mainly due to the strength of the current and the width of the river. By early afternoon of 12 March only 50 animals were carried across. In view of this, it was decided that 40 Column, together with store animals not yet across, should return to the east and come under the command of Morris Force (4/9 Gurkha Rifles). Brigade Headquarters and 30 Column nevertheless continued their march in a north-westerly direction reaching Namza on 16 March.

In the meanwhile, from among those of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade who had landed at "Broadway", 2 King's Own and 1 Cameronians had left the air-strip on 12 March. The former's intention was to cross the road and railway between Indaw and Katha,



and thereafter move south-west to the area of Nankan railway station. The Cameronians crossed the road and railway further north between Mawhan and Mawlu to the Dayu area. 6 Nigeria Regiment had been sent to Manhton from "Broadway", where it was to provide the garrison for the proposed "Aberdeen" stronghold. Five days after starting, viz. on 16 March, the regiment had its first clash with a Japanese patrol. At this time, receiving orders to attack Bilumyo, north-west of Mohnyin, the regiment proceeded in that direction. While the Namyin Chaung was being crossed on the evening of 19 March, the columns came under light machine-gun and rifle fire. There was a good deal of confusion, the wireless set of 66 Column was lost and in consequence nothing further was heard of it till it arrived on 5 April at "Aberdeen". The other Nigerian column (39) after laying booby-traps on tracks and mining a culvert, reached "Aberdeen" on 30 March.

The King's Own found the country over which they had to operate far more difficult than they had at first anticipated. The going was slow, and it was not until 20 March that 41 Column crossed the road and railway in the vicinity of Hiebwe after a short engagement with a Japanese patrol. The other column (46) crossed further west without incident. After suffering acutely from food and water shortages due to the failure of supply-drop, the two columns crossed the Meza river on 27 March and proceeded westwards to a rendezvous north of Nankan to which area the Cameronians had also been ordered.

The two columns of 1 Cameronians, in the meantime, soon after leaving "Broadway", also found the track difficult and each column, therefore, selected its own route. On 16 March, 26 Column reached a point six miles north-east of Mawlu when contact was made with Brigadier Calvert, and at his request they laid booby-traps on the road Auktaw—Mawlu. On the same day, the other column (90) was about 8 miles to the south-east. Early on 21 March, 26 Column started crossing the Meza river due west of Auktaw where it was attacked by a small Japanese party of 40 men. The crossing was completed and in the process, the column lost 1 killed and 4 wounded. News of this engagement unfortunately could not be conveyed to 90 Column which had also planned to cross the river in the neighbourhood. The Japanese were by now fully on the alert and frustrated the attempt to cross after an engagement lasting for an hour and a half. The column was therefore forced to make a detour to the east towards Indaw. The two columns eventually managed to cross the Meza river separately and finally assembled together at the appointed rendezvous in the Nankan area.

We may now turn to the Brigade Headquarters and 30 Column at Namza. The commander of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade



soon after his arrival there received orders to prepare a landing strip in the Meza valley for a small force known as "Bladet". On the night of 19/20 March, this force, consisting of 4 patrols in five gliders, landed at Shwemaunggan. Although all the gliders were damaged, no casualties occurred. The force commenced operations almost immediately against the Japanese lines of communication between Kawlin and Wuntho.

On the morning of 20 March, the air-strip was abandoned and the two columns of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade crossed the Meza river, arriving at a point 4 miles south-west of Nankan, two days later. Meanwhile Morris Force (4/9 Gurkha Rifles), after crossing the Shweli river east of "Chowringhee" on 16 March, had marched rapidly towards the Bhamo—Siu road, which it reached on 20/21 March. The force was later joined by 40 Column and Dah Force which were amalgamated; and this new combined force continued to be known as Morris Force. Finding the Bhamo-Siu road to be little used by the Japanese, the force destroyed "as many bridges as possible"<sup>3</sup> and continued its march to the Bhamo-Lashio road, running south-south-east from Bhamo.

#### DEATH OF WINGATE

Ever since the landings on "Broadway" and "Chowringhee" General Wingate, commander of the 3rd Indian Division, had been paying regular visits to "Aberdeen", "Broadway" and "White City" to personally supervise the operations on the spot. The weather, for the time of the year, was unusually bad. High winds and heavy downpours had begun early in March, and storms of thunder and lightning were frequent. On 24 March, General Wingate was returning from "Broadway" in a B.25 (Mitchell) bomber, on his way to Imphal, but he did not reach his destination. Subsequent search revealed the charred remains of his plane which had crashed in a storm. All the ten occupants of the plane including two British war correspondents were killed.

On being informed of General Wingate's death, Lord Mountbatten wished to fly in and address the Chindits personally, but was dissuaded by the united representations of his Commanders-in-Chief to take risks. He had therefore to content himself with paying his final tribute to Wingate in an Order of the Day:

"General Wingate was killed in the hour of his triumph. The Allies have lost one of the most forceful and dynamic personalities this war has produced. You have lost the finest and most inspiring leader a force could have wished for.....

<sup>3</sup> Narrative of Operations, Morris Force, p. 2.



"He had lit a torch. Together we must grasp it and carry it forward. Your gallant and hazardous expedition into the heart of Japanese-held territory will grow into the final reconquest of Burma and the ultimate defeat of the Japanese.

"He was so proud of you. I know you will live up to his expectations."<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Churchill in a speech in the House of Commons said of General Wingate:

"There was a man of genius who might also have become a man of destiny. He has gone, but his spirit lives on in the Long Range Penetration Group, which underlies all these intricate and daring military operations based on air transport and air supply."

General Wingate's death was a hard and bitter blow to the troops under his command. He was succeeded by Brigadier Lentaigne on 30 March, whose command of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade devolved on Major Masters, his brigade-major.

#### THE FLY-IN OF MORE TROOPS

It has already been stated that the air-strip at "Aberdeen" was completed on 23 March with the help of American engineers and equipment which had been brought in six gliders the previous day. The 14th Brigade was to be flown into "Aberdeen" between 22-28 March to disrupt Japanese communications in the area Pinlebu-Wuntho, with the object of compelling the ultimate withdrawal of the 31st and 15th Divisions. It was originally intended to keep this brigade in reserve for two or three months after which it was to relieve the brigades already committed in Northern Burma. But this plan was modified on account of the Japanese offensive against the IV Corps front which started on 8 March. By the middle of the month the situation had become grave; and Lord Mountbatten had therefore decided, in consultation with General Wingate, to accelerate the time-table and to fly in the 14th Brigade and the 3rd (West African) Brigade (organised by battalions for the defence of brigade strongholds) to "Aberdeen" in the Manhton area.<sup>5</sup>

The second phase of the fly-in which began on 22 March coincided with the "most critical stage" of the main battle on the IV Corps front. All available transport aircraft had been diverted to supply the IV Corps and to transport the 5th Indian Division from Arakan to Imphal. Consequently, an extremely limited number of transport aircraft were available for the fly-in of these two brigades of the 3rd Indian Division.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in *Wingate's Raiders*, p. 185.

<sup>5</sup> Mountbatten's *Report*, p. 50.



Fly-in of the 14th Brigade from the air base at Lalaghat to "Aberdeen" was completed in the following order:

73 and 32 Columns (2 Black Watch)	...	...	Between 23-27 March
47 and 74 Columns (7 Leicesters)			" 28 March—1 April
16 and 61 Columns (1 Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire)	...	}	" 2-4 April
84 and 65 Columns (2 York and Lanc)	...		
59 Column (Advance Brigade Headquarters)	was flown in		
by small groups	...	"	23 March—4 April

The first elements of the 3rd (West African) Brigade were landed on the night of 25/26 March, and by 12 April the fly-in of the entire brigade was completed. "Various circumstances such as weather, shortage of Dakotas, the phases of the moon, and slight enemy opposition had combined to make the fly-in to "Aberdeen" stronghold as protracted and wearisome as the fly-in to "Broadway" had been short and effective."<sup>6</sup>

The 14th Brigade (Brigadier T. Brodie) had originally been ordered to establish and hold a block on Kawlin-Pinlebu road at Alezu thereby seriously interrupting the communications of the 15th and 31st Divisions. By reason, however, of the urgency of this task and the slow progress made in landing the 14th Brigade, the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to the Pinlebu area, while the role of the 14th Brigade was changed on 30/31 March to that of preventing Japanese reinforcements reaching the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade area from the south and west. This task was to be achieved by establishing a block on the Indaw-Banmauk road by 42 and 73 Columns, and the remainder of the 14th Brigade less 74 Column was to operate against the road and railway between Meza railway station and Thedaw. 74 Column (7 Leicesters) was to remain temporarily as a floater column west of "Aberdeen" owing to Japanese activity in the Mansi area and the vulnerability of "Aberdeen" stronghold.

On 7 April a block on the Indaw-Banmauk road, near milestone 21, was established by 32 and 73 Columns from where they operated successfully until 19 April, when they were given a new task. This block prevented the Japanese from using this supply route, but "provided little in the way of a catch".<sup>7</sup>

Advance Brigade Headquarters (Column 59) and the two columns, 54 and 65, York and Lanc left "Aberdeen" on 4 April and approached the Bon Chaung gorge down the Meza river. A railway

<sup>6</sup> Report on Operations carried out by Special Force, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Narrative of Operations, 14th Infantry Brigade, p. 1.



bridge was blown on 13 April and two days later two girder bridges were blown up just south of Bon Chaung railway station, against Japanese resistance, with explosives dropped from transport aircraft. Considerable damage was also done to the station where ten trucks, huts and installations were destroyed with flame throwers and Piat projectors. Japanese casualties in this operation were estimated at 41 killed while the 14th Brigade had lost 4 men killed and 11 wounded.

It has already been mentioned that one of the delaying factors in the fly-in to "Aberdeen" was a certain amount of Japanese air opposition. This opposition began on the morning of 28 March and continued almost daily until 10 April. For example, 10 Zero aircraft carried out a raid on 3 April, but could inflict very little damage, and the next day 24 Zeros bombed and strafed the air-strip. Since "Aberdeen" was beyond the effective range of Allied fighter aircraft, the Zeros had little to fear. Several hits, however, were claimed on them by the light anti-aircraft guns of the 14th Brigade.

On the night of 2/3 April, Major-General Lentaigne, the new commander of the 3rd Indian Division, held a conference of brigade commanders at "Aberdeen". At this conference it was decided not to retain "Aberdeen" as a permanent stronghold, since it was poorly situated, and that the "White City" fortified block should now be turned into a stronghold. Consequently, 12 Nigerian Regiment (3rd West African Brigade) was sent to strengthen the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade at "White City" on 3 April, and some time later 7 Nigerian regiment was also sent to "White City" to form part of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade striking force. The task of garrisoning "Aberdeen" was assigned to 6 Nigerian Regiment which had arrived there from "Broadway" on 27/28 March.

#### JAPANESE ATTACKS ON "BROADWAY"

It is now necessary to turn to "Broadway" which had remained unmolested by Japanese air or ground attacks till the night of 11/12 March, when the fly-in of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was completed. By 12 March, the garrison battalion, 3/9 Gurkha Rifles, which had received its baptism of fire in Arakan, had completed its preliminary digging-in. 1 Kings, the floater battalion, was ready to carry out its task of patrolling within a radius of nearly twelve miles from the stronghold. Six Spitfires, one of which crashed on landing, were flown in for the protection of the airfield on 12 March. In the meantime troops of 25-pounders and light anti-aircraft guns had also been safely landed on the air-strip. Thus "Broadway" was "fast developing into a very strongly defended position. It was



naturally quite impossible to protect the whole perimeter, so one area with good water was chosen to make a strong-point which would dominate the airfield."<sup>8</sup>

The first Japanese air attack came on 13 March when 30 Zeros bombed the air-strip. The five serviceable Spitfires shot down four Japanese planes and probably two more while the anti-aircraft guns accounted for one plane. The Japanese attack has been described as "singularly ineffective." The Allies lost one Spitfire, the radar set on the airfield was destroyed, and a large number of crashed gliders were set on fire. Otherwise little damage was caused. The conduct of the garrison troops was admirable throughout the attack and their morale high afterwards.<sup>9</sup>

Four days later on 17 March, a second attack was made by eleven Japanese aircraft flying in low from the east. The attack came as a surprise, because the planes were discovered by radar when they were only nine minutes' flying time away. Owing to the short notice, the defenders were caught napping. Out of five aircraft, only two could take off in pursuit. The remaining aircraft were left on the air-strip. The two Allied aircraft were quickly engaged by a formation of Japanese fighter planes, and one of them was shot down. The three grounded aircraft together with a number of light aircraft were destroyed, and the one remaining Spitfire was subsequently recalled. As a result of this action, no fighters were again based on "Broadway". The disaster, according to Colonel Rome, was due to "an understandable error of judgement on the part of the squadron leader."<sup>10</sup> The Japanese, following their success of the previous day, attacked the stronghold again on 18 March and caused some damage.

A few days after the withdrawal of the Spitfires a Japanese force consisting of 12 bombers and fighters attacked "Broadway" with 50-lb. anti-personnel bombs, incendiaries and 500-lb. bombs. The bombing was accurate, and all bombs fell on the targets located on the air-strip proper or in the locality. Much damage was caused to American light plane stores and equipment, but casualties in the garrison were negligible.

The last attack on "Broadway" was made on the morning of 27 March when four Zeros ineffectively strafed the air-strip. One light plane was struck while taking off and its pilot killed. During these attacks, at least six Japanese planes were shot down. The raids had an extremely bad effect on the morale of the light plane force personnel. They were much shaken, and refused to fly for several days. The wisdom of keeping a large number of light planes on the

<sup>8</sup> Report on Operations of 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Col. Rome, *Diary of Events at Broadway*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.



air-strip for evacuating casualties may be questioned, because this work might as well be carried out by only 8 to 10 planes.

On 25 March, two days before the last air attack on "Broadway", the first warning of danger from Japanese ground forces was received. It was reported that a force of 600 Japanese troops was stationed at Sinbo, twenty miles east of the stronghold. 82 Column was at once sent to investigate, but the report eventually proved to be false.

The following day (26 March), Major Astell was sent with half the reconnaissance platoon of 41 Column, temporarily marooned at "Broadway," to investigate a Kachin report of a large Japanese force having crossed the Kaukkwe river and moving south to attack the stronghold. At first light on 27 March, the Japanese force was located by the Allied patrol to the South of "Broadway." The patrol immediately engaged the force, killing 7 Japanese and wounding a few others, before retiring. While withdrawing, the patrol lost two or three men. In view of the obvious threat of a Japanese attack, 82 Column was ordered to return at once to a rendezvous in the vicinity of "Broadway"; at the same time the floater company of 3/9 Gurkha Rifles and a part of 41 Column reconnaissance platoon took up positions on the main track leading to the stronghold from Kaukkwe.

At about 1600 hours on 27 March, the reconnaissance platoon of 41 Column exchanged shots with a Japanese patrol on the edge of the air-strip after which the latter withdrew. It now seemed certain that a Japanese attack would be launched within 48 hours and, as it was too late to evacuate the light planes that day, arrangements were made for them to fly out at first light on the 28th.

During the night of 27/28 March, Dakotas landed as usual with supplies for the garrison. The landing started at 2000 hours, and by 2230 hours the last plane had left for base. Fifteen minutes later, the floater company of the 3/9 Gurkha Rifles was heavily attacked from the west. The fighting continued fiercely until midnight when the noise of firing died down. It was a pitch-dark night and visibility in the open was limited to about five yards. To add to the difficulty of the defenders, wireless contact between the 3/9 Gurkha company and the stronghold had broken down. At one stage it was feared that the company had been overrun and dispersed, but subsequent events proved these fears to be unfounded. The company had fought gallantly until it was forced to make a withdrawal about 0010 hours (28 March).

The Japanese then began their advance across the airfield and attacked the west perimeter of the stronghold, which was mainly held by the field and light anti-aircraft troops with some Gurkha troops in support. For the rest of the night the attack flowed



around the perimeter as the Japanese attempted to find a way in through the wire. Expecting to find a garrison of only 300 troops, the Japanese were completely surprised by the strength of the stronghold. Nevertheless, they carried out their attack with "great dash and determination." Just before first light a small number of Japanese troops had succeeded in penetrating the perimeter in one place, and soon after 3 Japanese with a light machine-gun were killed inside the perimeter.

Shortly after first light, about two platoons of the floater company re-entered the perimeter and it was found that some 60 men from this company and the garrison were either killed, wounded or missing as a result of the night engagement. "The floater company had fought extremely well, killing 60-70 of the enemy, including the Battalion 2nd in-charge, and had fought their way back in the pitch darkness showing the most admirable control and discipline."<sup>11</sup>

In the morning of 28 March, two companies of Japanese troops were located to the north and south of the stronghold perimeter at a distance of only 200 yards. At 1000 hours, a company of 3/9 Gurkha Rifles made a determined attack on the Japanese to the north of the perimeter, killing at least eighteen of them in a gallant *kukri* charge. Allied casualties were one killed and seven wounded. Later, the same day, at about 1600 hours, 82 Column arrived back in the vicinity of the stronghold and attacked the Japanese company to its south. The attack was carried out by only two platoons, and was not pressed when the Japanese were found to be in slit trenches constructed outside the perimeter. The rest of the day was quiet, limited to occasional sniping by both sides. Two further heavy attacks on the stronghold were made by the Japanese during the night of 28/29 March. Both were beaten off with only minor casualties to the garrison.

On the morning of 29 March, an Allied patrol reported 250 Japanese digging in, north of the stronghold locality. The entire area was thereupon mortared intermittently, and a Japanese battalion gun which opened fire was quickly knocked out by the troop of 25-pounders. About midday, the remainder of 28 Column arrived and at 1600 hours a strong attack was launched on the Japanese to the south of the perimeter in which flame throwers were used. The attack was finally pressed with a bayonet charge, which dislodged the Japanese from their positions, but owing to the lateness of the hour and the prevailing general confusion, Allied troops eventually withdrew. Twenty-two Japanese were killed in the course of this action, but Allied casualties were no less heavy.

<sup>11</sup> Diary of events at Broadway, p. 7.



There was little Japanese activity during the night of 29/30 March, but some Japanese patrols made an attempt to cut the wire all around the perimeter. At first light on 30 March a Gurkha patrol reported that the Japanese company in the north had evacuated the dug-in positions. But they had mostly concentrated in strength south of the stronghold. A Chinese Captain, used by the Japanese as an interpreter and who had escaped to the Allies, stated on being questioned that the Japanese had suffered approximately 200 casualties in the fighting at "Broadway" and that one company had already withdrawn west of the Kaukkwe.

On 30 March, a Japanese reconnaissance plane and a supply-dropping plane were shot down by light anti-aircraft troop. Two aircraft of the Light Plane Force, unaware of the situation, landed on the air-strip and took off again without any untoward incident.

A counter-attack by 82 Column and one company of 3/9 Gurkha Rifles on 31 March, with planes of the United States Air Task Force in direct support, met only minor opposition and the Japanese were forced to withdraw north-west to Hopin in great disorder, abandoning large quantities of equipment. 82 Column was ordered to pursue the retreating Japanese, but could not do so because of delay in reorganising the troops.

The night of 31 March/1 April passed quietly, since no Japanese troops remained near the air-strip. Patrols sent out on 1 April to salvage light aircraft and stores lying around the airfield met with no opposition. They found about five planes completely destroyed, but otherwise little damage was caused to stores such as petrol, aircraft, ammunition etc.

By 2 April, the situation at "Broadway" had returned completely to normal. The landing of Dakotas recommenced and no further ground or air attacks were made on the stronghold till it was evacuated on 13 May 1944.

#### 16TH BRIGADE OPERATIONS AROUND INDAW LAKE

It has previously been stated that on 20 March General Wingate had ordered the 16th Brigade to launch an attack on Indaw with all available personnel at the earliest opportunity. It seemed probable at that time that the Japanese garrison, whose estimated strength was between 2000 and 3000, was being strongly reinforced and there was every need for urgency. But the urgency with which the attack on Indaw was mounted was unfortunate in many respects. The brigade had just completed a hard march of four hundred miles and was in need of rest. Moreover, the attack was launched without previous reconnaissance of the area. "In the light of after events, it seems clear that a delay of three days, to enable troops to rest and



eat, and reconnaissance to be carried out, would have been worthwhile".<sup>12</sup>

On 24 March, Brigadier Fergusson left "Aberdeen" on his way to assault Indaw and a conference of column commanders was arranged in a rendezvous, one mile north of Auktaw for the next day. Unfortunately, however, two columns (1 Cameronians) of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade, which had passed through the Auktaw area three days previously, in order to secure their own passage to the south, had spread the rumour that Indaw was about to be attacked from the north. The effect of this deception was that the defenders of Indaw were for the most part concentrated in the north when the 16th Brigade reached the area. Moreover, on 25 March, the projected conference by the 16th Brigade Commander could not materialise because of a skirmish with 150 hostile Burmans. The skirmish ended with a few minor casualties to the brigade, but had disastrous consequences for the success of its plan of operations against Indaw. It had the effect of warning the Japanese of the approach of the brigade in strength. Brigadier Fergusson had confessed that one of the mistakes he committed was in failing to assess accurately "the Jap reaction to the news they must have had of my approach".<sup>13</sup> In view of these facts coupled with the extreme shortage of water between Auktaw and Indaw, the commander of the 16th Brigade was forced to modify his plans in order to secure a water-point for his troops.

According to the modified plan, the Leicesters columns were to advance along the isolated Kyagong range separated from the main hills by the railway valley, and itself dividing the railway from the Indaw Lake. At the top the range is "so narrow that it is a question of moving along it in single file; its sides are split every two or three hundred yards by deep little gullies, running down to the railway on the east side, and to the lake on the west."<sup>14</sup> Along the range, the Leicesters were to proceed to Inwa on the eastern shores of Indaw Lake, while the columns of 45 Reconnaissance Regiment were to seize the northern end of the Lake immediately south of Thetkegyin, thus making sure of a water supply, after which they were ordered to link up with the Leicesters.

The Leicesters columns subsequently carried out their part of the plan, catching the Japanese unawares. On 26/27 March they had advanced into Letpangon village and secured a footing on the northern end of Indaw East landing ground. During the same period, 22 Column (2 Queens) laid a successful ambush on the Indaw-Banmauk road at milestone 20, killing 30 Japanese and destroying

<sup>12</sup> Narrative of Operations, 16th Brigade, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Diary of events at "Broadway", p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101-2.







five trucks. Allied casualties were one officer and four men. This engagement had important consequences on Japanese morale, in that they were afraid to use this vital road for five weeks thereafter.

The parallel thrust towards Indaw by 45 Reconnaissance Regiment, however, came to grief. It came up against a strong Japanese force in the Thetkegyin area and suffered heavily. Unable to disengage, one of the two columns was obliged to disperse after heavy losses. Both columns, very tired and without water for two and a half days, suffered great hardships, and were unable to reach the Lake. The Leicesters were thus left unsupported at Inwa, and no troops remained "to exploit the valuable gains which they had made."<sup>15</sup> At the same time the other column (21) of 2 Queens also found itself in difficulties in the neighbourhood of Sedan Chaung where it encountered a strong Japanese motor-borne patrol. In the engagement the column lost a large number of mules and most of the heavy 'offensive' weapons. With the loss of 21 Column and the disintegration temporarily of the two columns of 45 Reconnaissance Regiment, 22 Column alone remained intact within reach of Inwa.

In the meantime, the Leicesters were firmly established on Indaw East airfield. They maintained their position there for two days in spite of spirited Japanese attacks to dislodge them. But left to themselves, they could neither take advantage of their gains nor could they stay there indefinitely. In view of these facts, the brigade commander ordered a withdrawal at 1950 hours on 28 March. But this message could not reach the Leicesters before 0300 hours next day due to bad weather. However, thanks to the prompt support of No. 1 Air Commando planes, the Leicesters completed their withdrawal with the minimum of interference. On the same day, other columns of the brigade also began to withdraw to "Aberdeen" for rest and reorganisation.

Back in "Aberdeen", the columns of the brigade cast their accounts. The Reconnaissance columns had been the worst sufferers, while the losses suffered by the Leicesters were "surprisingly light", but their commander had had his arm broken in two places at the preliminary skirmish at Auktaw, and was "a write-off for the rest of the campaign".<sup>16</sup> For his exploits, he was awarded the D.S.O. later.

During the next fortnight, columns of the 16th Brigade rested in turn at "Aberdeen" while others sent out offensive patrols north of Indaw, with the object of drawing off Japanese troops concentrating in the area, south of "White City". "Aberdeen" was then

<sup>15</sup> Narrative of Operations, 16th Brigade, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> *The Wild Green Earth*, p. 120.



garrisoned by the 6th and 12th Battalions of the Nigeria Regiment, while brigade headquarters of the 3rd West African Brigade had come in to work under the command of the 16th Brigade. The stronghold was subjected to frequent air raids by Japanese planes, flying singly or in formation, but the standard of shooting of Allied anti-aircraft gunners was excellent and the raids became few and far between. Light aircraft stationed at "Aberdeen" did remarkably good work in flying out casualties, bringing in reinforcements and carrying much needed supplies to the "White City" road and rail block. About the middle of April, the 12th Nigeria Regiment was transferred to the "White City" block from "Aberdeen".

After withdrawal from Indaw, the main concern of the 16th Brigade was to help the "White City" stronghold. Frequent conferences were held between the commanders of the 16th Brigade and the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, and thereafter the columns of the 16th Brigade were engaged in harassing the area south of "White City", and raiding Japanese dumps in Indaw. Between 7-12 April, 1 Leicesters, operating on the Mawlu—Pinwe road killed at least 90 Japanese with only four casualties to themselves. At the same time, 22 Column laid ambushes on the road from Thetkegyin.

On 10 April, the two columns of 45 Reconnaissance Regiment left "Aberdeen" for the Mawlu area where they remained under the command of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade until 22 April. During this period, the regiment was engaged in severe fighting, losing fifty-five officers and men in being killed and wounded. The number of casualties which the columns inflicted on the Japanese could not be accurately estimated, but the Japanese losses probably "exceeded their own in a ratio of at least three to one".<sup>17</sup> On 21 April, as a result of heavy losses suffered, the two columns (45 and 54) were amalgamated into one, to be known as 45 Column.

On 13 April, 1 Leicesters returned to "Aberdeen" while 51 and 69 Columns took over the task of harassing the Japanese lines of communication south of Mawlu from 17, 71, and 22 Columns. They were ordered not to get heavily involved with the Japanese in view of future operations. 69 Column, however, fought one small but successful patrol action in the Pinwe area in which six Japanese were killed.

The brigade by then was exhausted and malaria was widespread, the Leicesters "being particularly hard hit by fever from their sojourn beside the marshes of the Indaw Lake." The Leicesters along with brigade headquarters and 2 Queens were at this time posted at "Aberdeen", while 45 Reconnaissance Regiment was at "White City".

<sup>17</sup> Narrative of Operations, 16th Brigade, p. 5.



OPERATIONS OF 111TH INDIAN INFANTRY BRIGADE ON THE  
PINLEBU—THAYETKON ROAD

Earlier, we have traced the progress of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade in the Nankan area and the area north of Mawlu, upto the end of March. From the end of March to 10 April, the efforts of the brigade were diverted to a fresh field. With the Japanese offensive west of the Chindwin reaching its maximum intensity, and with the 14th Brigade not then in a position to commence operations against them, the commander of the Fourteenth Army decided to employ the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade against the communications of the Japanese 31st Division in the Pinlebu-Thayetkon area. This was the role for which the brigade had been training since its inception.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, during this period, 2 King's Own, 2 Cameronians and 30 Column of 3/4 Gurkha Rifles, all of which had now joined up, laid ambushes and established a series of road-blocks north of Pinlebu. The road-blocks were generally held by two columns for 48 hours at a time, while other columns received supply drops and moved to take up new positions on the road. To meet this threat to their lines of communication, the Japanese increased their convoy escorts but to no avail. It only resulted in heavier casualties being inflicted on them by the various columns of the brigade. On 2 April, 30 Column attacked a village at the road-junction west of Taungmaw, while three days later 46 Column (2 King's Own) ambushed and destroyed two Japanese vehicles with Piat and medium machine-gun fire. On 6 April, 1 Cameronians successfully established a road-block twelve miles south-south-west of Thayetkon from which place they inflicted many casualties on a company of Japanese troops attacking in strength. Undeterred by this reverse, the Japanese again launched an attack the next day but were forced to withdraw.

By 10 April 1944, the Japanese attacks on Imphal and Kohima had lost their momentum and the Fourteenth Army no longer considered it necessary to employ the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade in harassing Japanese communications, north of Pinlebu. Instead, the brigade was given the two-fold task of (a) preventing hostile reinforcements reaching "Aberdeen" and "White City" via, Wuntho, Pinlebu and Thayetkon, and (b) destroying Japanese stores and dumps in the area immediately west of Thayetkon.

The columns of the brigade were largely successful in achieving the second task. On 11/12 April about 2000 gallons of petrol, 40 tons of stores and an ammunition dump were destroyed by 2 King's Own and 90 Column (1 Cameronians) operating four miles north-west of Thayetkon. On 13 April, 26 Column destroyed 14 vehicles in a car park south-west of this village.

<sup>18</sup> Narrative of Operations, 111th Brigade, p. 3.



In pursuance of the first task, 90 Column later established a road-block north of Manyu. On 17 April the block was unsuccessfully attacked by a small Japanese force which suffered 24 casualties.

#### OPERATIONS EAST OF THE IRRAWADDY

It may be recalled that Morris Force (4/9 Gurkha Rifles) after destroying a number of bridges on the Bhamo-Siu Road, had moved eastwards towards the Bhamo-Lashio road.<sup>19</sup> In accordance with the plans made, 49 Column of Morris Force destroyed two bridges and laid several successful ambushes on the road, while 94 Column destroyed an 80-foot iron bridge near Mahtet and demolished a section of the road cut into the hill-side; "this very successful demolition was still an obstacle when 40 Column reached this site nearly a month later".<sup>20</sup> *The Japanese were not found in any strength on the entire road and the work of destruction was carried out by the columns without any interference. After a conference, it was decided to take more effective action on this road when, suddenly on 27 March, a wireless message was received from the commander of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade ordering Morris Force immediately to advance on the Bhamo-Myitkyina road in support of Dah Force, which was in difficulties.*

About the middle of March, Dah Force had set off in the direction of the Irrawaddy. After crossing the Irrawaddy at a point north-east of Bumsi on 18 March, Dah Force continued its march to the Bhamo-Myitkyina road which it crossed a few miles south of Nalong on the night of 21/22 March. The force reached Nahpaw, on 25/26 March in a somewhat exhausted condition but "just in time for a battle the next night".<sup>21</sup>

On 23 March, Chinese Guerillas in that area had been driven from the village of Sima Pa by a strong Japanese column after severe fighting lasting several hours. The Chinese fell back to Lungre Bum where they were again attacked on 26 March and had to withdraw to Nahpaw. As soon as the Chinese withdrawal started Lieutenant-Colonel Herring, commanding Dah Force, ordered a stand to be made in front of Nahpaw fort and the mixed force of Kachins, British and Chinese quickly dug themselves in. The Japanese attacked early that night and in a silent bayonet charge succeeded in driving the Allied force into the jungle to the north-east. It was perhaps a mistake to have attempted a defence of Nahpaw in face of a superior Japanese force and "it would have been wiser to have dispersed straight into the jungle".

It was the news of this Japanese attack on Dah Force at

<sup>19</sup> See p. 346.

<sup>20</sup> Narrative of Operations, Morris Force, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Narrative of Operations, Dah Force, p. 3.



Nahpaw that sent Morris Force hurrying towards that area, as mentioned earlier. Accordingly, both columns of Morris Force headed north to cross the Taiping river and bring help to Lt.-Col. Herring's men. On 6 April, Morris Force, was placed under the direct command of the 3rd Indian Division. Dah Force was contacted for the first time on 10 April north of the Taiping by 49 Column. The column thereafter continued north, while 94 Column carried out a successful raid on Myothit.

Apart from 49 Column and 94 Column of Morris Force, 40 Column (3/4 Gurkha Rifles) had also been sent at the same time to Nalong area. Between 7-10 April, 40 Column, which had not yet caught up with Morris Force, ambushed two Japanese convoys on the Bhamo-Lashio road killing some 60 men and destroying three vehicles with very little loss to itself.

Meanwhile, after the reverse at Nahpaw on 26 March Dah Force had reassembled in a wild, thickly wooded valley. For a time it kept in hiding, though on 27 March a patrol of this force managed to re-enter Nahpaw and found the place clear of Japanese troops. In order not to draw the attention of the Japanese to the force's whereabouts, no supply-drop took place until the night of 7 April.

On the night 12/13 April, Dah Force again took the initiative after a lull lasting for about a fortnight. The two roads running north from Nalong were blown, telephone lines were cut and two Japanese lorries laden with troops were blown up by mines. In addition, the bridge over the Mali Hka was destroyed.

The acute danger to Dah Force was by then over, hence Lieut-Colonel Morris decided to attack Nalong and thereafter establish a stronghold for the monsoon at Sima Pa with 40 and 49 Columns. It was also decided that 94 Column would carry on operations against the Bhamo-Myitkyina line of communication.

The plans of Dah Force also were changed about the same time as a result of orders received that no Kachin guerillas were to be raised south of the Taiping river. This decision, Lt.-Col. Herring felt, gave "a death blow to all prospects of organising a Kachin rebellion", since the most warlike Kachins lived south of that river.

The first meeting between Lieut-Colonels Morris and Herring took place at a village north-east of Nalong on 17 April. At this meeting it was decided that Dah Force should provide 15 Kachin levies for each column to act as guides and scouts, while the remainder of Dah Force continued its proper task of raising and training levies around Nahpaw.

#### THE ATTACK ON MAWLU

Meanwhile similar operations had been in progress in the "White City" area of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade. After the



failure of the Japanese attack on the "White City" block on 21/22 March, which has been already described, the garrison was left undisturbed for over a fortnight. However, the commander of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade did not wish to keep the garrison idle and decided to impose his will on the Japanese by launching an attack on Mawlu where a large Japanese force was stationed. As Brigadier Calvert himself put it: "I decided that the time had come when we must cease waiting for the Jap to attack us but to go after him and gain the initiative."<sup>22</sup>

His plan of attack was that 3/6 Gurkha Rifles (36 and 63 Columns) assisted by 50 Column (1 Lancashire Fusiliers) would attack Mawlu on the morning of 27 March. 50 Column was to take up positions near Nyaungbintha and from there shoot up the Japanese troops retreating south across the paddy fields. 36 Column after moving across the paddy fields before first light was ordered to occupy the western edge of Mawlu, while 63 Column along with Advance Brigade Headquarters was to put in the main attack from the east.

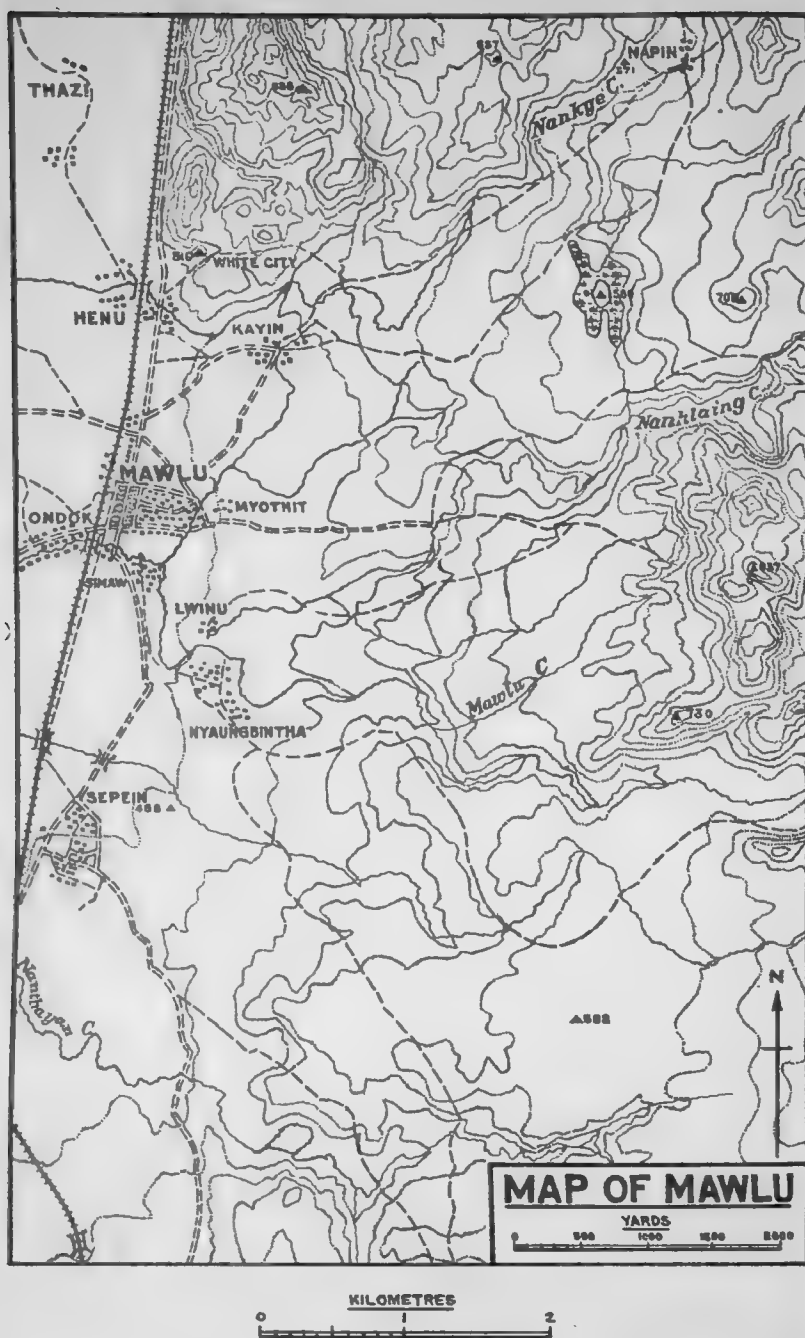
At first light on 27 March, 63 Column made an "excellent" attack on a Japanese force of 60 in well dug-in positions. A short but bitter engagement followed, with the Gurkhas using flame-throwers, kukri and bayonet to drive the Japanese from the village. When the Japanese finally fled, they left behind 23 dead, much equipment and some records. By 0930 hours, Mawlu had been cleared. 36 Column, which had carried out its role as arranged, inflicted casualties on the retreating Japanese; 50 Column, having been unfortunately delayed by a Japanese patrol near Kayin, arrived at Nyaungbintha in time only to see the last of the Japanese troops fleeing towards Sepein. South of Sepein, 20 Column reported about 400 Japanese moving down the road in considerable disorder.

As a result of this successful action the Japanese withdrew south to Indaw. They feared an Allied attack against Mohnyin and therefore collected all available troops for its defence. All together there were approximately 2000 Japanese troops in the Mohnyin area.

The following few days (27 March—6 April) passed off comparatively quietly at the "White City". Constant patrolling was carried out by the garrison, and columns came out of the block in turn as 'floater' and to stretch their legs. Mines were laid and booby-traps placed on all the roads from the south, while 20 and 80 Columns blew up several bridges on the road leading south from Mawlu. In the north, 50 Column drove the Japanese as far back as Kadu without much difficulty. At this time the whole area from Pinwe to Kadu was controlled by the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, which started

<sup>22</sup> Narrative of Operations, 77th Brigade, p. 14.







using the trolleys up and down the railway for a stretch of about forty miles.

The lull also provided an opportunity to improve the intelligence system in the surrounding countryside. Both 20 and 50 Columns had started recruiting Kachin levies in accordance with the direction laid down by the late Major-General Wingate. The new recruits provided the 3rd Indian Division with much valuable information in the coming weeks. The position of the Allied troops *vis-a-vis* the local inhabitants improved considerably during this period and their medical propaganda was "most efficacious."<sup>23</sup>

Another valuable source of information was discovered towards the end of March. This was the railway telephone line which, it was found, was still being used by the Japanese. By tapping-in on this line, the garrison was able to keep itself constantly informed of Japanese movements and intentions.

By the first week in April, Brigadier Calvert had carried out three of the five instructions originally given to him, viz. (1) establishing and holding an airfield, (2) establishing a firm block on the road and railway and (3) stopping communications on the Irrawaddy. The other two objectives—that of denying the road to Myitkyina to the Japanese and destroying all Japanese forces to the north—remained to be fulfilled.

#### FURTHER ATTACKS ON "WHITE CITY"

At the Brigade Commanders' conference at "Aberdeen" on 2/3 April, it had been decided that "White City" should be turned into a stronghold, complete with Dakota strips, one 25-pounder troop, and light anti-aircraft guns. Though not possessing one of the most important requisites of a stronghold as conceived by Major-General Wingate, namely inaccessibility, its natural defences, supplemented by the efforts of the garrison in digging and wiring, helped to compensate for this. Moreover, the paddy-fields on the western side of the railway were highly suitable for a Dakota strip.

On 3 April, five gliders landed west of the block with engineer equipment for the construction of a landing ground. By the following day, a Dakota strip had been prepared for receiving aircraft, but due to bad weather no planes landed on that day. On 5 April, 25 planes landed with a troop of 25-pounders, a troop of light anti-aircraft guns, two 2-pounder anti-tank guns and a company of 6 Nigeria Regiment (which had not been flown into "Broadway"). But the Japanese interference at this stage prevented further sorties being made for several weeks.

It had also been decided at the "Aberdeen" conference that the

<sup>23</sup> Narrative of Operations, 77th Brigade, p. 16.



3rd (West African) Brigade, less 6 Nigeria Regiment, should take over the garrison duties of "White City" as soon as possible, thereby releasing the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade for the more mobile role of a long range penetration brigade. As a preliminary to this hand-over, 12 Nigeria Regiment at once left "Aberdeen" for "White City" while, on 4 April, the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade despatched a battle group of 1,000 men north to take Kadu and reconnoitre Mohnyin. Brigadier Calvert had further intended to augment this force by sending the rest of his brigade as soon as defences of "White City" had been taken over by the 3rd (West African) Brigade.

Several Japanese telephonic conversations were intercepted about this time, indicating a large build-up of their forces to the south of the block. It was also known that there were at least a battalion and a half of Japanese troops in the Sepein-Nathkokyin area. From diaries found later, it was discovered that the Japanese had actually three battalions. Allied patrols were sent to this area during the night of 5/6 April and elements of the Japanese 2nd Division, recently arrived in Burma from Malaya, were identified from the captured documents.

On 6 April, the "White City" garrison was reinforced by two West African companies which were placed in the southernmost area of the block. During the night the new comers were subjected to a large-scale bombing attack, but they passed the ordeal with their morale unshaken, and gave a good account of themselves in the fighting. On 7 April, after a number of small encounters and bombing, shelling and mortaring by both sides, the Japanese put in a succession of two-battalion attacks from the south. 1 and 2 Battalions of the 29th Independent Regiment of the Japanese Yu Division, a new arrival from the Bassein—Sandoway area, were identified during the day's fighting.<sup>24</sup> About 150 Japanese were killed in these attacks, all of which were repulsed.

From this time onwards, the Japanese attacked the "White City" area every day. The sequence of attack was practically the same every night, although varying in intensity. Shelling of Allied positions began every day at 1700 hours and continued until dusk. Just after last light the stronghold's east and south-east perimeter would be attacked through the jungle. Fighting always continued till late in the night, but these attacks were usually repulsed by the garrison's mortar and medium machine-gun fire. There was a saying current in the Allied camp about the Japanese daily attacks: "the forces of evil would be at work in the darkness but as soon as dawn came they vanished away."<sup>25</sup> In spite of the fighting, the stronghold garrison regularly received supply-drops every night.

<sup>24</sup> Narrative of Operations, 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.



On 10 April, as decided earlier, Brigadier Gillmore, commanding the 3rd (West African) Brigade, took over the defence of "White City," while Commander 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, moved out to meet the returning battle group which had been sent north. The two parties met at midday on 12 April at a point some four miles north-west of "White City." 7 Nigeria Regiment and 45 Reconnaissance Regiment of the 16th Brigade had been placed temporarily under the command of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade and the combined force, which in addition consisted of 63 Column, 36 Column rifle company and 50 Column (less some support weapons), prepared to counter-attack the invaders south of "White City." The whole strength of this force was 2,400 men.

On 12 April, Brigadier Calvert decided to attack Sepein which was the Japanese roadhead and where all their anti-aircraft guns were sited. This measure was contemplated to provide relief to the "White City" block.

Initially, plan of attack was that 50 Column after marching through the jungle would capture Thayaung on the evening of 12 April. "It was the meeting place of various streams and therefore had much natural cover against shell fire." It had, moreover, a paddy-field which might easily be converted into a light-plane strip. The rest of the brigade would then follow and take up perimeter defence for the night around Thayaung. The reconnaissance parties would then be sent out in the night to Sinkho and Ponhon, which, if unoccupied, would be captured by the Reconnaissance Regiment and the Gurkhas respectively. All these objectives were captured without opposition.

With Thayaung, Sinkho and Ponhon captured without any difficulty, Brigadier Calvert issued orders for the attack on the main Japanese positions in Sepein. The Gurkhas were to assault the village at dawn, supported by 25-pounder guns from "White City." The 50 Column was to cross the railway at the same time and capture the lorry park situated at the junction of the road and Nanthayan Chaung. Between 3/6 Gurkha Rifles and 50 Column would advance the 45 Column and 54 Column of the Reconnaissance Regiment, while the Nigeria Regiment would be kept in reserve at Thayaung.

The attack opened very promisingly. The 50 Column easily captured the lorry park, but found no lorries there. The 45 Column lost its way in the thick forest, but 54 Column kept abreast of the advancing Gurkhas, who entered Sepein village after overcoming some opposition, and all seemed well. But the main Japanese positions were then discovered in very thick undergrowth and jungle beyond the village. The attack was held up in front of these bunkers. An intense artillery fire was put down against the bunkers, but the defenders still poured out a murderous fire when the Gurkhas



and 54 Column tried to advance. Soon after, a heavy counter-attack by the Japanese south of Sepein placed 50 Column at BM 457 in a dangerous position. This column had earlier overrun a Japanese gunner headquarters complete with telephone exchange and other equipment. At this time, the Allied force held the line of the railway from Henu to BM 457, but Brigadier Calvert, after a personal inspection of the position, felt that the Gurkhas and the Reconnaissance Regiment were not well sited for defence; 50 Column was in danger of being cut off. Taking all these factors into consideration, he ordered these troops to break contact and withdraw to Ponhon and Thayaung, the withdrawal to start with 50 Column on the right. The withdrawal was carried out successfully by dawn on 14 April, the last troops to withdraw being the West Africans. Allied total casualties in this attack were 16 killed and 35 wounded, while 50 Japanese had been killed, mostly in the initial assault.

On the morning of 14 April, the Japanese continued shelling "White City." Sixteen Zeros and six "97" bombers made a heavy attack on the garrison causing casualties to men and mules. Two Sherman type tanks came up the road in the evening, but quickly withdrew when the garrison opened fire; one was hit but neither was seen again.

The Japanese harassing fire continued intermittently throughout 15 and 16 April. Further attacks were made on "White City" during the morning of the 15th, but the Japanese were unable to penetrate the defences. By now the position of the garrison was getting critical day by day; the Japanese had broken through the wire fencing on the night of 16/17 April after a fierce assault, but had been forced to withdraw.

On the morning of 17 April, the Japanese made their last and most determined attack on the block. To the accompaniment of heavy firing, by sheer weight of numbers they broke through the wire at the eastern end of the perimeter and gained a footing on one of the small hills in the area. A counter-attack by three platoons of 1 South Staffords quickly ejected the Japanese and the attack was abandoned. A bombing and strafing raid by planes of the United States Air Task Force virtually ended the battle of "White City." Some 250 Japanese had been killed within twenty hours, but the garrison had also suffered and was beginning to become weary as a result of the constant attacks.

Prior to this attack, the garrison commander had sent a message to Brigadier Calvert asking for his support. Since its withdrawal from Sepein on 13 April, the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade striking force had been indirectly assisting the "White City" garrison by blocking all roads and tracks between Sepein and Indaw. Hence, in response to the appeal, he decided to move north upto Nanthayan



Chaung and attack the Japanese from the rear with a force comprising the Advance Brigade Headquarters, 3/6 Gurkha Rifles and 45 Reconnaissance Regiment. 7 Nigeria Regiment was, in the meantime, left behind to defend the block on the road, while 50 Column was to put in a holding attack on the Sepein area. The brigade battle group started off at 1200 hours with 45 Reconnaissance Regiment in the lead. At the Mawlu Chaung the leading regiment came upon some Japanese troops who were bathing, and "killed or chased them with bayonets naked into the jungle."<sup>26</sup> In small skirmishes, the regiment also drove off batches of Japanese troops killing some without loss to itself. The force bivouacked in thick jungle that night and on the following morning continued its northward march. On the steep banks of the Chaung, a fierce engagement developed; 45 Reconnaissance Regiment again fought gallantly. Some Japanese troops coming up fast in three's down a path were mown down by one of its platoons, which eventually forced its way across to the other side.

But the fight was not yet over. The progress of the Reconnaissance Regiment had now practically stopped. The Gurkha companies on the left of the regiment were also held up and could make no further progress. A Japanese counter-attack, with three medium machine-guns sweeping the flat jungle, caused many casualties in the Reconnaissance Regiment and Brigade Headquarters. The majority of the wounded were, however, brought back due to "most admirable individual efforts of British and Gurkhas alike."<sup>27</sup> At this moment, the Mustangs arrived and dropped their depth charges right on the Japanese counter-attacking force. In spite of this, the tired battle group slowly withdrew to the previous night's bivouac. The group reached its destination at 0200 hours on 19 April. It then withdrew further south to rejoin the West Africans near Nahpi. Four officers and between 60 and 70 other ranks had been killed in the day's fighting; 20 men were missing and 150 wounded. The battle group had, nevertheless, killed at least 90 Japanese, who had left their dead all over the battlefield. Both sides had withdrawn, and as a result of these casualties and those inflicted by the garrison of "White City," the Japanese temporarily withdrew from Mawlu and never attacked the block again.

With the heavy casualties inflicted on the Japanese in and around Mawlu, the first phase of the operations of the 3rd Indian Division came to an end. The force had established three firm bases in the heart of Japanese-occupied Northern Burma. "Aberdeen" was not troubled by the Japanese ground attacks, while the other two, "Broadway" and "White City", had beaten off every attempt to

<sup>26</sup> Narrative of Operations, 77th Brigade, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.



overrun them. Both were henceforth safe from Japanese attacks and were left undisturbed.

In addition to the establishment of three strongholds there were other forces of the 3rd Indian Division then striking at the Japanese lines of communication on the Bhamo—Myitkyina road, on the Pinlebu-Thayetkon road, and on the railway running south-west of Indaw. The effect of these threats to their lines of communication was that the Japanese were unable to send any considerable reinforcements to their northern troops, opposing General Stilwell's advance directed towards Mogaung—Myitkyina. These had in fact slowed down to a mere trickle.

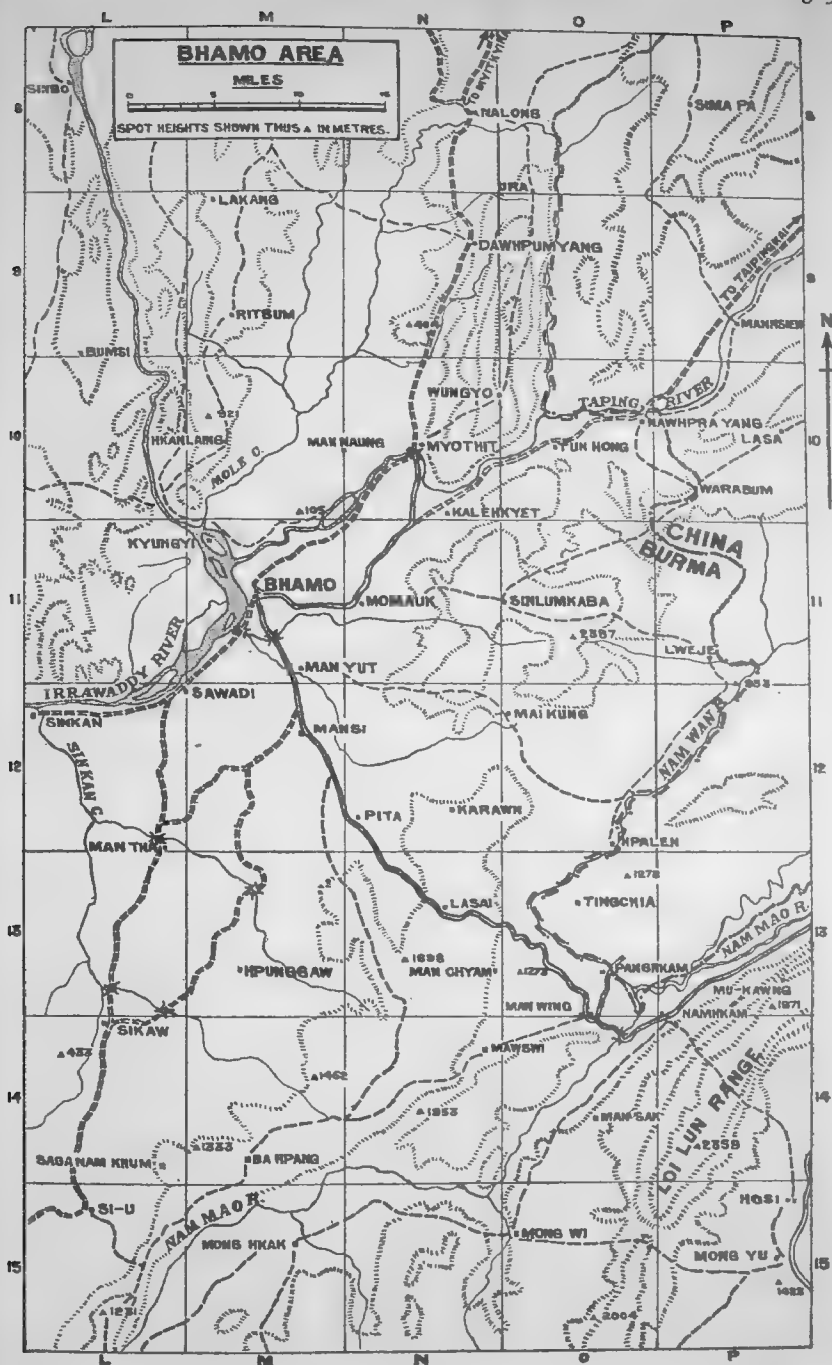
Unfortunately, however, General Stilwell's Chinese/American force advancing from the north had also slowed down due to various difficulties; and the troops of the Japanese 18th Division, by living off the land and conserving their stocks of ammunition, were still a formidable fighting force. The Allies had to undergo severe fighting before they were able finally to subdue the Japanese forces in the north some four months later.

#### HARASSING THE JAPANESE LINE OF COMMUNICATION

Considerable damage had been done to the Japanese lines of communication during the first phase of the operations, and it was all the more necessary to intensify this mode of activity. The Japanese 18th Division, which was retreating before the advance of General Stilwell's force from the north, had been weakened and the first thing to do was to cripple it. Another objective was to disrupt the Japanese line of communication to the Chindwin front.

It has already been mentioned that Major-General Wingate had decided to capture the airfield, about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles west of Indaw, at the commencement of operations. After its capture the intention was to hold it throughout the monsoon. These plans were based on two assumptions, (1) that garrison troops would be available and (2) that the airfield was an all-weather one capable of taking Dakotas during the monsoon. The first of these was impracticable because the 23rd Brigade, the only reserve formation in the Special Force, had to be placed under the command of the XXXIII Corps at the end of March, in view of the Japanese offensive against Imphal. Without such a force being available, it was not possible to hold the Indaw airfield for any length of time. And if Indaw could not be held for long, there was every reason for the Special Force to move north as soon as possible in an attempt to link up with the Chinese Armies in India before the monsoon. This Force would, it was felt, be more usefully employed further north, for once it had linked up with General Stilwell's force the task of evacuating







the sick and wounded would present few difficulties. For otherwise, if Special Force remained isolated throughout the monsoon, with no all-weather air-strip, casualty evacuation might become well-nigh impossible.

In spite of there being clear reasons in favour of the move to the north, orders were not immediately issued to that effect; instead, the commander of the Special Force decided to prepare for the move by adopting a policy of large-scale destruction in the Indaw area. By these means, he hoped to avoid any Japanese follow-up in case the Special Force had later to fall back upon its original positions.

On 18 April, the 14th and 16th Brigades were ordered to put in separate, but loosely co-ordinated, attacks on the Indaw area, the former from the south and the latter from the north. Both the brigades were to destroy dumps of food and ammunition, cut off rail and road communications and inflict the maximum number of casualties on the Japanese. At the same time, the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to leave the Thayetkon area and to move east down the axis of the Banmauk road. Its allotted tasks were:

- (1) to take over a road-block on the Banmauk-Indaw road from 42 and 73 Columns of the 14th Brigade,
- (2) to destroy installations at Pinhinga,
- (3) to prevent any follow-up by the Japanese from Kanywa, and
- (4) to be prepared to act as general reserve for the Indaw operations.<sup>28</sup>

#### OPERATIONS IN THE INDAW AREA

In conformity with these orders the 16th Brigade, which was concentrated in the Hkoghe area on 19 April, started preparations for the drive towards the south. Prior to the move 45 and 54 Columns, which had been with the striking force of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade and had suffered heavy casualties, were now formed into one column known as 45 Column. This force immediately set off for "Aberdeen" in the north while 2 Queens of the 16th Brigade (21 and 22 Columns) attacked and captured the airfield of Indaw West on 27 April without firing a shot. A quick examination of the runway was sufficient to banish all hopes of using the airfield during the monsoon. It was reported "unsurfaced, unchambered and undrained and therefore only fit for fair-weather use".<sup>29</sup>

After destroying mechanical transport sheds, control posts and signal installations, the brigade withdrew. Further north, on the

<sup>28</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.



western shores of Indaw Lake, 51 Column made a successful attack on a Japanese position. The 16th brigade thus completed the last task allotted to it in the orders issued on 28 February by the commander of the 3rd Indian Division. It was completely tired and worn out after its long march from Ledo and its subsequent operations in the marshy area of Indaw Lake. A report described the troops as "exceedingly weary, and ridden with malaria".<sup>30</sup> Hence, it was decided by the commander of the 3rd Indian Division to return the brigade to India. Consequently, the Leicesters columns (17 and 71) and 51 Column of the gunners went to "Aberdeen" from where they were flown to India, but not before they had their last dig at the Japanese by shooting down no less than four of their aircraft. Evacuation of these columns started on the night of 29/30 April and was completed on the night of 4/5 May, after which "Aberdeen" was abandoned. The stronghold had been bombed and strafed during its six weeks' existence, but the garrison had encountered no ground opposition throughout this period. The evacuation of 2 Queens and 69 Column began from "Broadway" on the night of 1/2 May and was completed by 7 May, by which time the brigade had arrived in Assam. In the process of this evacuation two aircraft crashed on the way resulting in the loss of 12 men and 7 mules, otherwise the whole operation had proceeded smoothly throughout.

In the Indaw area the other brigade which was operating was the 14th Brigade and we may now examine its achievements. On 18 April, 74 Column (7 Leicesters) ambushed a large body of Japanese troops near Tatwin killing 49 and destroying three ammunition carts before dispersing. Between 22 and 26 April the brigade had indulged in "every type of destruction"; it destroyed 15,000 gallons of petrol and over 21 dumps of stores; cut the railway in 16 places and ambushed a train; attacked two villages and a railway station; laid mines and booby-traps and killed over 100 Japanese troops.<sup>31</sup>

During the same period the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade had also been active, but could not carry out its allotted role in the plan of destruction. On 19 April, 26 Column (1 Cameronians) successfully ambushed a Japanese party on the road north-east of Naunglon, killing 41 men and destroying four vehicles. On the same day, however, as a result of a conference between General Stilwell and the commander of the 3rd Indian Division a plan for future operations was decided upon which involved a change in the original role allotted to the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade. Two days later the brigade was ordered to move north via "Aberdeen" to the Hopin area where Major-General Lentaigue intended to establish a fortified block similar to the one at "White City."

<sup>30</sup> Operations of 16th Brigade in Burma, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Report on Operation of Special Force, p. 14.



## CHAPTER XIX

### Special Force Moves North

Towards the end of April General Stilwell's offensive in North Burma had made some progress, but not to the extent originally hoped for. It had moved 35 miles, yet it was at least 20 miles away from Kamaing. Also, the Japanese were still in occupation of Mogaung and Myitkyina.

About that time the Special Force had also been relieved of the responsibility to assist the IV Corps<sup>1</sup> and therefore there was no ground for it to remain as far south as Indaw, especially when it was considered essential to link up with General Stilwell's force. By 27 April, plans for the northward move had crystallised and instructions were issued by the Headquarters 3rd Indian Division for the evacuation of the three strongholds ("White City", "Aberdeen" and "Broadway"), and the gradual move north of all the brigades. It was further decided that a new fortified block (to be known as "Clydeside") should be established between Hopin and Pinbaw in the first week of May. The 111th Indian Infantry Brigade was allotted this task when it was already on the move to Hopin. The rendezvous for the assembly of various columns of the brigade was fixed at Mokso Sakan. The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade's striking force, which was then in the area between "White City" and Nahpi, was asked to provide all-round protection for "White City" until 1800 hours of 2 May, when it was to move north, keeping east of the railway. It had orders to go to the assistance of the new stronghold by 9 May. Similarly the 14th Brigade was to provide all-round "floating" protection for "White City" until it had been evacuated, and thereafter it was to move north, about the middle of May, to assume responsibility for the protection of "Clydeside" from the west.

"Broadway" stronghold was to be evacuated on the night of 12/13 May. Its garrison, less 81 Column, was to form a striking force under the command of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, while 81 Column was to act as "floater" battalion to the new stronghold. "White City" fortified block was also to be evacuated simultaneously and its garrison thereafter was to come under the command of the 14th Brigade. The "Aberdeen" garrison consisting of 6 Nigeria Regiment (Columns 66 and 39) was to come under the command of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade.

<sup>1</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 14.



It was also planned that after the successful establishment of "Clydeside" and the failure of Japanese efforts to capture the stronghold, it would be possible to release two brigades "to co-operate with CAI in the capture of Mogaung".<sup>2</sup>

On 1 May 1944, Major-General W. D. A. Lentaigne, accompanied by the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Fourteenth Army, paid a visit to General Stilwell's Headquarters where the details of the above-mentioned plan were finally approved, and it was agreed that the Special Force should come under the latter's command at a date to be notified later.

#### ESTABLISHMENT OF "BLACKPOOL" STRONGHOLD

Columns of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade acting in accordance with their new instructions began leaving "Aberdeen" on 25 April, and the last of them, 30 Column, left on 29 April. The march of these columns lay through the Kachin hills and was made "under conditions of great heat and occasional rain".<sup>3</sup> They assembled at their rendezvous at Mokso Sakan on 6 May. The next morning the brigade was able to establish a new fortified block midway between Hopin and Pinbaw, about two miles west of the railway. Before the day was out, Advance Brigade Headquarters, 46 Column (2 King's Own) and 1 Cameronians (26 and 90 Columns) were in position in their new areas. Defence stores of all kinds were dropped during the night of 7/8 May. For sometime this new stronghold was known as "Clydeside", but on 18 May its name was changed to "Blackpool".

The Japanese quickly reacted to the setting up of this new position in their midst and "Blackpool" was attacked on the morning of 8 May. The attack was, however, beaten off by 46 Column without much difficulty; with some losses to the Japanese.

On the evening of the same day three gliders landed with equipment for the construction of a Dakota strip. A fourth glider was hit by small-arms fire and crashed; its crew was killed and its load destroyed. The following day, 41 Column entered the block and took over some positions from 46 Column. By the night of 10/11 May, an air-strip had been prepared for the landing of Dakotas. Of the first five to land, one overshot the runway and burst into flames while two other were damaged. Further landings were therefore called off while the surface was levelled out and the strip improved generally. Two nights later, Dakota sorties were resumed without incident.

81 Column arrived at "Blackpool" on 12 May and was given a

<sup>2</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Narrative of Operations, 111th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 3.



"floater" role to the north-east of the block. On the same day 30 Column (3/4 Gurkha Rifles) and a column of 6 Nigeria Regiment were ordered to occupy and hold the pass in the hills between "Blackpool" and Indawgyi Lake. The second column of 6 Nigeria Regiment was to remain on the shores of the lake north-west of the pass. Throughout this period "Blackpool" was being intermittently shelled by the Japanese, but till 14 May no ground attacks were made.

The dawn of 14 May opened with a heavy and accurate shelling of the Special Force positions in "Blackpool". This was followed a few hours later by an attack on the north-west corner of the stronghold by one company of the Japanese troops. The attack met with initial success and the Japanese dug in within less than 20 yards from the inner perimeter wire. A counter-attack by a platoon of 2 King's Own on the morning of 15 May failed to dislodge the interlopers from their positions. Accurate mortar fire from the garrison killed 50 of them during the course of the day, but they continued to hold on to their positions throughout 15 and 16 May. On the night of 16 May, the Japanese launched another attack with two companies but were repulsed with the loss of 70 men. Their aircraft had bombed and strafed the garrison on that day causing some casualties, but anti-aircraft troops succeeded in destroying one aircraft and damaging another. Shelling and sniping continued intermittently on 17 May, but no further attack was made by either side. On 18 May, all was quiet and it was discovered that the Japanese had withdrawn from their positions in the north-west corner of the stronghold. Patrols sent out from the garrison failed to make contact with them.

The "Blackpool" garrison was very tired as a result of constant Japanese shelling and sniping by day and fighting by night, which had lasted for four days. But the attack not being repeated the garrison was able to improve its defences and build up its stocks of ammunition and supplies. The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, in the meantime, had arrived in the Lamai area to the east. To the south-west the 14th Brigade was slowly moving north but heavy rains and difficult country had made its move most laborious. Consequently, it was not until 21 May that the leading columns of the 14th Brigade reached Kyusanlai Pass.

#### EVACUATION OF THE "WHITE CITY" AND "BROADWAY"

The northward move of the Special Force involved the abandonment of the three strongholds set up by it earlier. The story of "Aberdeen" has already been narrated and we may now turn to "Broadway" and "White City".



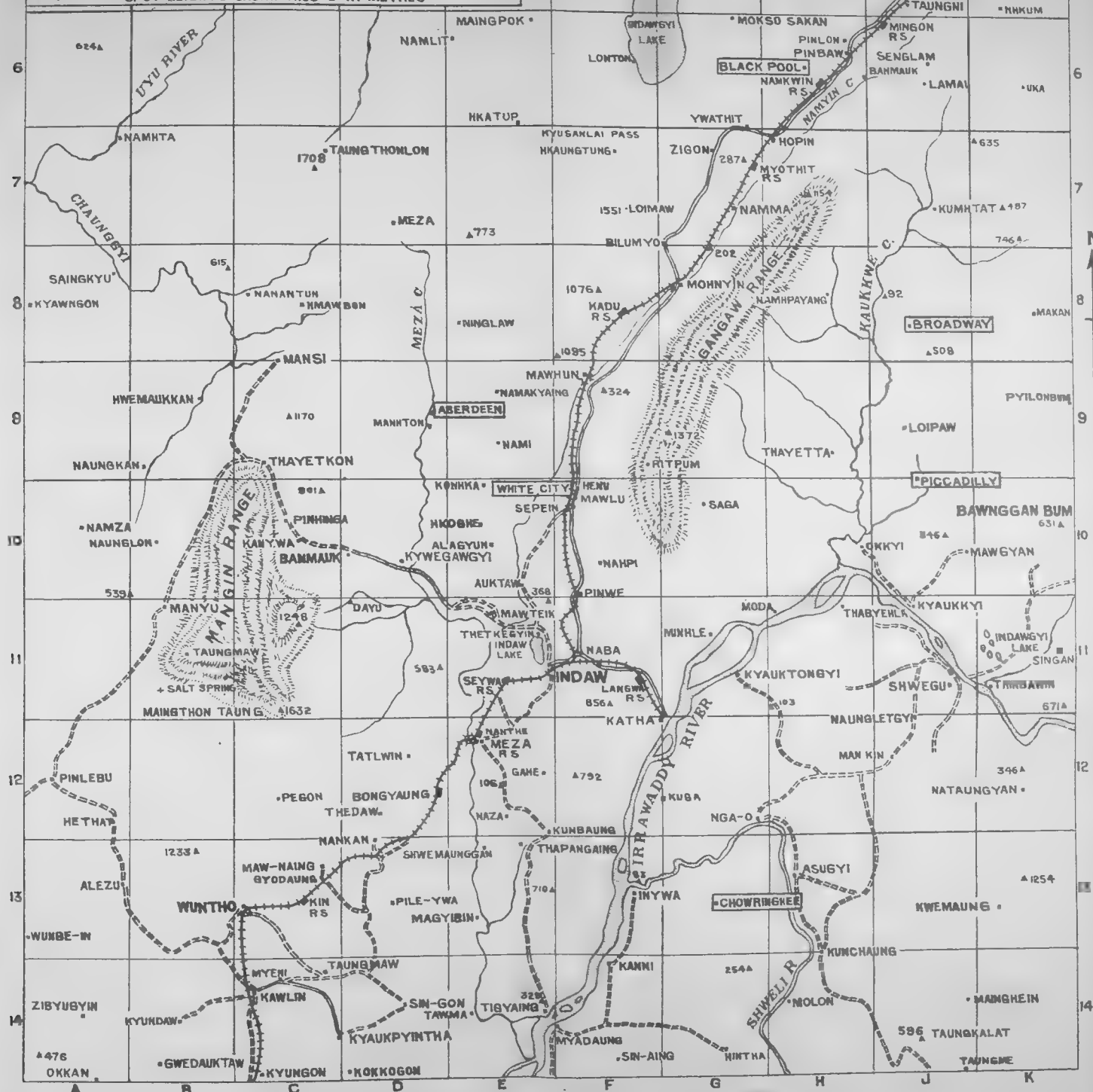
# WUNTHO-INDAW-BANMAUK AREA

6 AUG 1958

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NOTE. STRONG HOLDS SHOWN THUS BROADWAY



On 2 May, Brigadier Calvert commanding the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade received from the 3rd Indian Division instructions to the effect that "Special Force role is to assist Stilwell, capture and hold line Mogaung-Mvitkyina".<sup>4</sup> By this time troops of the brigade were tired due to fairly constant action against the Japanese without much relaxation. Nevertheless, in compliance with the above instructions, the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, less two battalions (3/9 Gurkha Rifles and 1 King's Own) still at "Broadway", moved north along the eastern slopes of the Gangaw Range. Except for a short engagement between the Japanese and 7 Nigeria Regiment the whole march was uneventful. On 8 May, the two columns of 3/6 Gurkha Rifles, which had suffered heavily in the fight in "White City", were amalgamated into a single battalion with three infantry companies. Similarly the columns of 1 Lancashire Fusiliers and 1 South Staffords were also combined. The entire brigade reached Lamai on 18 May, from where could be seen the "Blackpool" block across the Namvin valley. The tasks assigned to the brigade were to clear the hills of the Japanese, harass them along the road and rail by use of fighting patrols at night and to mortar their gun positions. Simultaneously, the 14th Brigade was on its way north from Indaw. By 5 May this brigade was concentrated near the "White City" and was ready to carry out its allotted task. On 7 May, 2 Black Watch (Columns 73 and 42) laid successful ambush on a track east of Mawlu, killing 40 Japanese, but the battalion itself also suffered heavy casualties. Two days later it encountered a fairly strong Japanese force east of "White City" and killed at least 60 of them in a vigorous bayonet charge. These successful engagements opened the way for the evacuation of the "White City". 16 Column and a company of 72 Column were "sharing" the village of Mawlu with the Japanese, thereby preventing them from bringing fire to bear on the air-strip. On the evening of 9 May, complete evacuation of troops and stores from the "White City" was carried out without alarms "except such as were caused by a nocturnal Beaufighter whose task was to keep the Japanese heads down by low-flying over the area".<sup>5</sup> "White City" block had been successfully held for a period of over seven weeks and, because of its situation upon the main north-south road and railway across Burma, it had helped to reduce the flow of Japanese supplies and reinforcements to their hard pressed troops in the north to "a thin trickle". Moreover, the efforts made by the Japanese to reduce the block had proved costly; over 1,000 of them had been killed in the course of the fighting in and around the "White City". The Japanese force of an approximate strength of

<sup>4</sup> Narrative of Operations, 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 16.



3,500 men earmarked for destroying the Special Force had been largely broken up.

The final evacuation of "Broadway" also proceeded very smoothly. Apart from air and ground attacks between 13 and 31 March, the stronghold had been left undisturbed by the Japanese. "It had, with the help of an extensive intelligence system, and two floater columns controlled an area for miles around, within which little could have happened without the Stronghold Command being informed." The evacuation was carried out, as arranged, on the night of 12/13 May. By 0600 hours on the 13th all stores and personnel had left the stronghold and hardly anything of importance was left behind. The light anti-aircraft troops and certain amount of ammunition, rations and stores were carried over to "Blackpool". 82 Column and 3/9 Gurkha Rifles (which had been divided into two columns—57 and 93—now that its role was no longer static) both left for "Blackpool" on 13 May. Thus with the evacuation of the "White City" and "Broadway" operations in the Indaw area came to an end.

#### OPERATIONS OF MORRIS FORCE AND DAH FORCE

The operations carried out by Morris Force and Dah Force upto the middle of April 1944 have been mentioned earlier. At that time Brigadier Morris had decided to attack Nalong with two columns and thereafter leave one column (94) on the Bhamo-Myitkyina road. The rest of the force consisting of two columns (40 and 49), was earmarked for a stronghold in the Sima Pa area which was intended to be established. On receiving a message from the Headquarters 3rd Indian Division, on 25 April, that no stronghold was to be established, the idea was abandoned. The first part of the plan, however, was carried out smoothly. The reconnaissance platoon of 49 Column reported that on 20 April a party of 400 Japanese was seen moving out of Nalong. Two days later, after an excellent air attack, the remaining Japanese in the village were put to flight and Nalong was captured without encountering much opposition. A large number of intelligence documents were captured; dumps of arms and ammunition were blown up and the village was razed to the ground. The steel rope ferry over Mole Chaung, south of Nalong, was also destroyed.

On 23 April, Brigadier Morris heard the news of an attack against the Dah Force. Leaving 94 Column on the road south of Nalong, he at once climbed up to Nahpaw with 49 Column and, on arriving in the area, sent out strong patrols to contact the small force of Kachin Levies. To his great relief Colonel Critchley of the



Special Force Headquarters brought the news that all was well with the Dah Force.<sup>6</sup>

Dah Force had been temporarily disorganised by a Japanese attack on a village four miles north-west of Nahpaw, but its small size enabled it to break off the engagement. It consisted of 1 South Staffords and four platoons of Kachin Levies. During the whole campaign Dah Force managed to kill nearly 300 Japanese whereas its own casualties were only 4 other ranks and 5 of Kachin Levies killed and missing. In addition, about 18 personnel were wounded and had to be evacuated.

A conference of the officers, which among others included Brigadier Morris and Lt-Col. Herring, took place at Nahpaw on 25 April. It was decided that Morris Force should, for a short time, operate on the road running north-north-east from Nalong and then move north to the Nhkram area. It was also decided to establish a jungle hospital at Nahpaw. Later on, this hospital proved a great success and over 300 patients, who would otherwise have been evacuated by light planes, were treated there and returned fit for operations.

Meanwhile, 94 Column was operating successfully on the road south of Nalong. On 23 April it inflicted about 25 casualties on a Japanese working party which was repairing the bridge over the Mole Chaung. Accurate mortar and medium machine-gun fire also knocked out a Japanese 75-mm gun. Allied casualties in this highly successful action were only two wounded. Two days later (25 April) the column established a block on the road and it was anticipated that with the support of another column the road would be effectively blocked for all types of vehicles. Nearly 300 Japanese vehicles were held up for some time until further reinforcements gave the Japanese considerable numerical superiority. The column was ultimately forced to withdraw after "a very lively battle". It was unfortunate that this engagement coincided with a pre-monsoon period of really bad flying weather and wireless did not reveal the existence of 40 Column which was then very close to the scene of fighting. Also because of the weather, between 24 and 29 April supply-drops could not take place and troops were forced to live on short rations. On 30 April, however, Morris Force received an excellent supply-drop which enabled it to replenish its depleted stocks. Thus ended a period of three weeks during which adequate food rations were not available to the troops.

On 1 May, 40 Column (3/4 Gurkha Rifles) which had been fighting alone so far arrived in the Nalong area and linked up with 49 Column. With his three columns at last concentrated, Brigadier

<sup>6</sup> Narrative of Operations, Morris Force, p. 3.



Morris handed over 49 Column to Lieutenant-Colonel Russell and formed a small Force Headquarters with which to co-ordinate the operations of his command.

By this time information was again received about the predicaments of the Dah Force. It was also learnt that the jungle hospital at Nahpaw had been abandoned because of the pressure exercised by a Japanese force estimated to be about 200 strong. Later, however, the hospital was successfully re-established a few miles north of Nahpaw. Early in May, it was moved across the Nam Tabet Chaung to a point 8 miles east of Sampai, while Headquarters Dah Force moved to Sima on 6-7 May.

During the first ten days of May, 40 and 49 Columns ambushed and blocked the road four miles north-north-east of Nalong. On 6 May they held up some 200 vehicles, while 3 bombers and 3 fighters of the United States Air Task Force, in spite of bad weather and poor visibility, bombed and strafed them. The most successful ambushes were those of 40 Column on 4 May and of a composite force of 40 and 49 Columns on the night of 8/9 May. In the latter engagement the Japanese brought a force of between one and two companies and a few pieces of artillery. But, having inflicted heavy damage on vehicles and personnel and having beaten off the initial Japanese counter-attack, the striking force withdrew. During the course of the engagement 94 Column after remaining for some time in support of the other column proceeded to milestone 461 near Nhkram to continue the blocking of the road; later on it was joined by 49 Column. 40 Column was given the task of piling stocks of rations in Sima, securing the suspension bridge across the Nam Tabet Chaung and establishing ration dumps to the north of the Chaung.

On the evening of 11 May a section of Dah Force levies scored a notable success at the road and track crossing, 10 miles south-west of Sima. From well prepared positions at the side of the road, they ambushed two lorries and a Japanese party of 200 marching men of whom at least 60 were killed at close range. By 15 May, most of the Dah Force had crossed the Nam Tabet with orders to harass the road running north-west from Kazu.

On 17 May, Morris Force was in contact with the Japanese only 25 miles south of Myitkyina West airfield which had been captured by "Merrill's Marauders" and the Chinese 150 Regiment after "executing a remarkable 20-day march under extremely arduous conditions" over the 5,000-ft. Naunhyit Hills. The next day, light anti-aircraft troops from Special Force were flown in to protect the air-strip from Japanese air attacks. At this time it was confidently expected by General Stilwell's force that Myitkyina itself would fall within a few weeks, if not days, but so stubborn was the Japanese



resistance that it was not until 3 August that the place fell to the Allies.

#### OPERATIONS IN DIRECT SUPPORT OF STILWELL'S FORCE

17 May is one of the important dates in the Burma campaign. With effect from 0900 hours that day, the Special Force, in view of the fact that it was there more directly assisting the southward advance of the Chinese-American force, came under the command of General Stilwell, and henceforward it directly co-operated with his advance on Mogaung-Myitkyina. It was hoped that the depleted Japanese *18th Division* would be caught between the Special Force advancing from the south, and the Chinese-American force coming from the north. A tactical Force Headquarters was therefore set up on 19 May at Shaduzup near Stilwell's Force Headquarters in order that close liaison might be maintained. At the same time it was felt that it would not be necessary for the Special Force to have its own separate Air Task Force: consequently, on 19 May, No. 1 Air Commando ceased its operations. For over three months it had provided untiring support to the Special Force brigades. Its gliders and transport planes had played a large part in the initial fly-in; its fleet of Dakotas, Constellations and light aircraft had flown in reinforcements and supplies and had evacuated hundreds of sick and wounded; its fighters and medium bombers had done outstanding work in support of the ground operations. Henceforth, the Special Force became the direct responsibility of 5320 Wing Northern Air Sector Force, which was supporting Stilwell's Force.

#### SITUATION ON 20 MAY 1944

At this stage the brigades of the Special Force were dispersed as follows:—

The 14th Brigade, with 7 and 12 Nigeria Regiments of West African Brigade under command, was still south of the Kyusanlai Pass. On its way to "Blackpool", its progress through the Indawgyi Lake valley had been reduced to only four miles a day due to heavy rains and the difficult terrain. "Almost hourly mules had to be unloaded and loaded again and men dared not sit down because of leeches, which were bad enough in their boots and on their legs, let alone all over their bodies. Everyone lived, ate and marched in mud. Many slept in jungle hammocks." The Kyusanlai Pass, controlling, as it did, the southern reaches of the Indawgyi Lake, was the only route through which casualties from "Blackpool" could

<sup>1</sup> McKelvie; *The War in Burma*, p. 162.



be evacuated. The Pass was therefore held by the brigade until the last week of June.

The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade (less 1 King's Own and 3/9 Gurkha Rifles) was concentrated at Lamai. This village made an excellent observation post from where a clear view was obtained of an area of 20 miles up and down the Namyin valley.

The 111th Indian Infantry Brigade, with 2 King's Own (combined into a single Floater column on 20 May), 1 Cameronians and 81 Column was enjoying a quiet spell at the "Blackpool" fortified block. 3/9 Gurkha Rifles arrived to garrison the block on 20 May as also a part of 82 Column. The latter column had encountered a Japanese convoy while crossing the main road south of "Blackpool". In the skirmish that ensued, although the column managed to kill 20 Japanese troops, it was itself forced to scatter and break formation. The main body subsequently arrived at "Blackpool" with two wounded and 190 missing, while the balance of the force, presumed missing, eventually joined the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade in the area of the hills.<sup>a</sup>

30 Column (3/4 Gurkha Rifles) was in position at the Pass to the west of the stronghold. 6 Nigeria Regiment 3rd (West African) Brigade which was also under the command of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade at this time had one column assisting 30 Column; the second column was posted between Kyusanlai Pass and Indawgyi Lake.

On 20 May, 49 and 94 Columns occupied Kazu. The following day 49 Column and three platoons of 94 Column crossed the Nam Tabet Chaung and cleared the Japanese from the area immediately north of the river. At this time 40 Column was piling up ration stocks in the Sima area, while Dah Force was setting up a comprehensive intelligence system north of the Nam Tabet and operating against the road between Kazu and Waingmaw.

#### JAPANESE TAKE "BLACKPOOL"

The short lull in the operations at "Blackpool" came to an end on 22 May, when the Japanese after making full preparations for the coming battle and having received a large number of guns (including anti-aircraft), heavy mortars and reinforcements of fresh troops, engaged the garrison and fierce hand-to-hand fighting raged for three days.

The Japanese launched the first attack on the stronghold airstrip by a strong fighting patrol, but it was successfully driven away. In this engagement they lost nearly 50 men killed; but undeterred,

<sup>a</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, pp- 17-18.



they put in another attack the following morning in greater strength. Patrols of 81 Column contacted this force of about two companies advancing towards the "block" but unfortunately failed to halt the attack. Consequently at 1630 hours, after a heavy preliminary barrage, the Japanese attacked and overran the air-strip. 2 Bofors and one anti-aircraft gun were lost and the garrison was compelled to withdraw into the stronghold perimeter.

Later the same evening, a Japanese battalion, supported by guns and mortars, put in a second attack from the south. Initially they succeeded in cutting the perimeter wire, but the position was soon restored. During the night, probing attacks were also made by them along the entire western perimeter of the stronghold.

That night all attempts to drop supplies of ammunition to the garrison proved abortive. The renewal of the Japanese attack unfortunately coincided with severe deterioration in weather conditions, although a meteorological report issued at midday had stated that there was no likelihood of the outbreak of the monsoon until early June. Due to bad weather during the period between 20 and 25 May, when the "block" had to be evacuated, not a single direct air support sortie could be flown. As a result the Japanese were able to install numerous anti-aircraft guns and field artillery in the immediate neighbourhood of the block, making daylight supply-drop virtually impossible. Several attempts were made by the Royal Air Force and the United States Army Air Force Dakotas, but the amount of food and ammunition dropped was totally insufficient. In one of the daylight supply-dropping missions, as many as 11 out of 12 Dakotas were hit by the Japanese anti-aircraft fire. In the meanwhile, night supply-dropping was also out of the question owing to weather conditions.

Another far-reaching result of the severe weather conditions was the inability of both the 14th and the 77th Brigades to come to the assistance of the "Blackpool" garrison. It had originally been planned that the 14th Brigade would protect the block from the west while the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade would move to the assistance of the block from the east in case of attack. As it happened, however, the 14th Brigade had made very slow progress, due to bad weather and receipt of inadequate supply-drops. It was still only in the Kyusanlai Pass area when "Blackpool" was attacked.

The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was in a similarly difficult, but more exasperating position. As a result of heavy rains, the Namyin Chaung, which separated the brigade from "Blackpool", had swollen into a fast flowing river over 200 yards in width. Consequently, only small parties were able to get across, while the rest of the brigade could do no more than bring down fire on the villages



of Banmauk and Pinbaw, and on to the road and railway, whenever a suitable target offered itself.

The "Blackpool" garrison, therefore, had to face a full-scale Japanese attack without adequate supplies of "consolidation stores, food, and ammunition", and without the air support so necessary to the conduct of a protracted defensive action by lightly equipped long range penetration patrols.

By 24 May the Japanese had established themselves in a semi-circle round the fortified block. Heavy artillery and mortar fire continued throughout the day; it being estimated that as many as 600 shells fell inside the fortress. The Japanese succeeded in penetrating the wire and occupying the south-east corner of the stronghold. A counter-attack quickly drove them out, but they were now securely established around the perimeter and the garrison's stock of ammunition was running low.

Three platoons of 41 Column, which had been on a "floater" role, were brought into the block during the afternoon of 24 May. Two of these were sent to reinforce 90 Column in the southern part of the stronghold at last light. Shelling continued throughout the night of 24/25 May, but in spite of this the Japanese made no further gains until 0500 hours on the morning of 25 May when they broke through the perimeter and established themselves on a small feature vital to the defence of the stronghold. A determined counter-attack failed to dislodge them and they were gradually extending their hold. On the other hand, rations had almost run out, ammunition was low and the garrison had already suffered some 220 casualties, including 70 killed and 100 missing. The weather was still very bad and there seemed little hope of either supplies or reinforcements arriving. Consequently, at 0800 hours on 25 May, the Commander 111th Indian Infantry Brigade decided to evacuate the block and withdraw towards Mokso Sakan.<sup>9</sup>

The 18-mile march to Mokso Sakan in appalling conditions of rain and mud took several days to complete. "Carrying 50 stretcher cases and assisting 150 walking wounded over hills 3,500 feet high was," to quote the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade Report, "an experience no one is ever likely to forget. The courage, endurance and cheerfulness of all ranks, particularly the wounded, was beyond all praise."<sup>10</sup> On arrival at Mokso Sakan the depleted columns of the brigade were in need of reorganisation, and for this purpose they were placed temporarily under the command of the 14th Brigade.

<sup>9</sup> Japanese casualties in the fighting at "Blackpool" could not be properly checked, but it was estimated that at least 200 had been killed. Lord Mountbatten has estimated that the Allied garrison at "Blackpool" succeeded in "almost annihilating" a regiment of the Japanese 53rd Division in the process."

Mountbatten's Report, p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> P. 5.



During this period 81 and 82 Columns (1 King's Own from the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade) were amalgamated into a composite 81 Column; 41 and 44 Columns (2 King's Own) into a composite 41 Column; and 26 and 90 Columns (1 Cameronians) into a composite 26 Column. The columns had suffered a great deal on account of insufficient supply-drops; in view of the increasing rate of sickness the medical officers were of the opinion that the brigade was not fit for further offensive operations.

On 31 May, Headquarters 111th Indian Infantry Brigade re-assumed command of 2 King's Own, 1 Cameronians, 1 King's, 3/9 Gurkha Rifles (57 and 93 Columns) and 6 Nigeria Regiment (39 and 66 Columns). The brigade was given the task of protecting the northern half of Indawgyi Lake, about 15 miles long, from where casualties were being evacuated by Sunderland Flying Boats used normally on "coastal and sea reconnaissance."

Since 7 May, plans had been in the making for the evacuation of casualties by flying boats in the event of the monsoon breaking before the Special Force had linked up with the Chinese Armies in India. Anchorages had been established on the north-east and southern shores of the lake—for the use of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade and 14th Brigade, respectively; and on 2 June the first load of 31 casualties was successfully evacuated by flying-boats. In the course of the next fortnight 500 wounded and sick men were successfully flown out without any opposition from the Japanese.

#### OPERATIONS AT KYUSANLAI PASS

While the "Blackpool" garrison was trying to ward off Japanese attacks, the 14th Brigade was trying its level best to come to its rescue. On 21 May, the 14th Brigade, after its long, arduous and unavailing attempts to relieve the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade, moved to the important Kyusanlai Pass. 74 Column (7 Leicesters), which was in advance of the rest of the brigade, immediately took up positions overlooking Ywathit, Hopin and the railway corridor, and within an hour or so of its arrival it had to repulse a Japanese attack on its newly acquired position. The column, reinforced by platoons and mortars of the 3rd West African Brigade, then booby-trapped the pass and occupied the forward slopes of the surrounding hills. Three days later, the Japanese returned with reinforcements and threw in a "big attack". They were, however, again beaten back and lost some 80 men.

The two columns of 1 Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, which had arrived in support, followed up this success by taking the village of Zigon, destroying its Japanese garrison and capturing, among other things, 1,000 bags of rice, bullock carts, 7 ponies and a large



number of quinine tablets. In this successful operation only one man was wounded.

#### OPERATIONS OF MORRIS FORCE IN WAINGMAW AREA

While the "Blackpool" operations were in progress, Commander Chinese Armies in India issued orders on 24 May to Morris Force to collect Dah Force, and then to proceed north with the utmost speed and cross over to Myitkyina, the fall of which was then considered to be imminent. The next day these orders were suddenly changed and the Morris Force was ordered to capture Waingmaw, a heavily defended town on the east bank of the Irrawaddy, immediately to the south-east of Myitkyina. If successful, it was to push ahead in an attempt to clear the bank of the river upto the point immediately opposite Myitkyina.

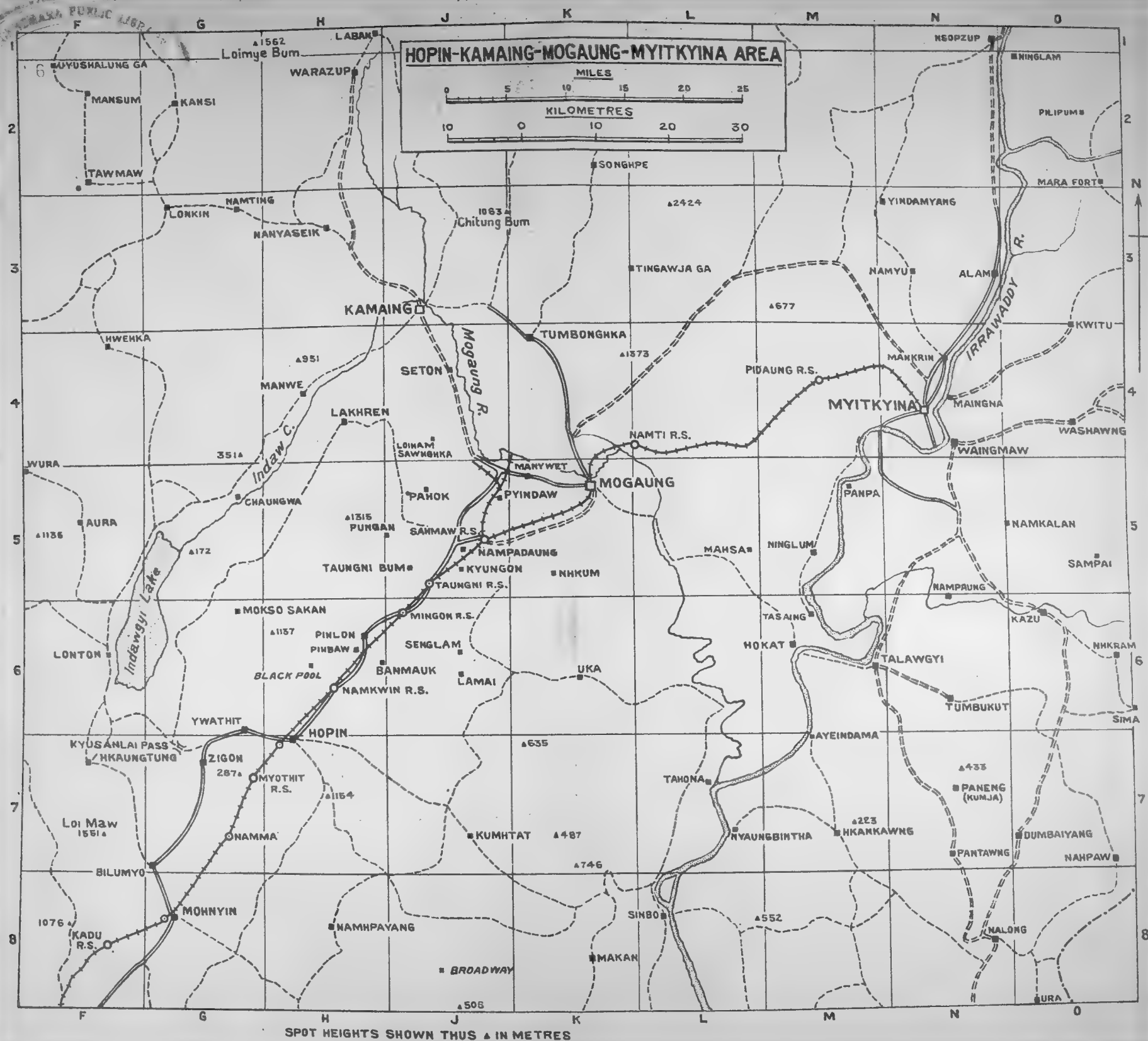
When these orders were received, Morris Force was in a predicament. 49 Column (less mules), 40 Column and three platoons of 94 Column were all on the north side of the Nam Tabet Chaung. The rest of the Force, however, was having great difficulty in crossing the river. The Chaung was in full flood, the bridge at Kazu had been swept away and, to add to its difficulties, a small Japanese force of 200 was moving to attack it from the south. Eventually, however, with two sections of Gurkhas holding back the Japanese party, the force was able to cross over, and for three days forced its way through "almost mule-proof swamp and jungle, the density of which limited progress to one quarter of a mile in an hour".<sup>11</sup> Prior to the march the Force had been constrained to destroy its dumps of rations and ammunition on the north bank of the river. Hence the most important problem facing the commander was to feed his men. As usual, supply-drop was rendered impossible because of bad weather and 40 Column had to ferry supplies forward.

Columns 40 and 49, considerably depleted in strength as a result of sickness and casualties, arrived in the Waingmaw area on 29 May. The troops were completely worn out by over 600 miles of march in the hilly country and considerably weakened by a diet of "K" rations which were often in short supply. According to the commander's estimate, the physical condition and potentialities of the troops were "reduced to 50% of normal".

The attack on Waingmaw village launched by the Morris Force on 29 May achieved complete initial surprise. The columns succeeded in penetrating some forward bunker positions, but after four counter-attacks by the Japanese, who were in considerable strength, the columns were forced to withdraw. By 2 June, 94 Column had

<sup>11</sup> Narrative of Operations, Morris Force, p. 6.







also arrived in the area, after a series of forced marches, and with its help a second attack was put in, but with no better results. The force had ultimately to withdraw because of lack of ammunition and absence of air support.

The Dah Force had also moved north along with the Morris Force, but, from the beginning of June, had no other operational role than reconnaissance and flank protection duties. On 2/3 June, the commanding officer crossed the Irrawaddy and was flown to Shaduzup where he met the commander of the 3rd Indian Division and Colonel Pearce of the American 101 Mission. It had been decided that Dah Force as such would cease to exist as "an integral part of Special Force".<sup>12</sup> As it would be inconvenient to have a small unit in the field tied down to operations in a particular sector, all ranks of the Dah Force were given the option of transferring their services to 101 Mission or of continuing to serve with the British forces. Three Burmese officers and six British other ranks chose the former alternative; the rest elected to remain with the Special Force and most of them were eventually evacuated on 22 June. Later, on arrival in India, 43 old soldiers of the Burma Rifles and about 122 Kachin Levies enlisted by Dah Force reported at the Depot of the 2nd Burma Rifles.

#### 77TH BRIGADE'S MOVE TOWARDS MOGAUNG

Simultaneously with the orders issued to Morris Force, Commander Chinese Armies in India had issued orders for 3/6 Gurkha Rifles (77th Indian Infantry Brigade), to reconnoitre the area south of Mogaung with a view to finding out Japanese dispositions; they were to withdraw to the hills if strongly opposed. Intelligence reports at this time placed the strength of the Japanese garrison in Mogaung at 4,000 and, therefore, the commander of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was reluctant to commit a single battalion to the attack without support. He, thereupon, decided to form a firm base in preparation for a brigade, rather than a battalion, attack. The original intention was that the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, along with another brigade, would move on to Mogaung in conjunction with General Stilwell's move from Myitkyina, but Japanese resistance in Myitkyina and their capture of "Blackpool" had resulted in only the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade's advance for the capture of Mogaung.

On 27 May, the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade had received orders to launch an attack for the capture of Mogaung.<sup>13</sup> The brigade was further communicated the fact that the road south of

<sup>12</sup> Narrative of Operations, Dah Force, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Narrative of Operations, 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 45.



Kamaing had been cut at Seton by the Chinese. It was also understood that within a few days the Chinese forces would be able to take Mogaung from the north. The 3/6 Gurkha Rifles had moved quickly and reached the village of Loihinche, three miles south-east of the town on 31 May. It was followed quickly by 1 South Staffords who joined on 1 June. Meanwhile, the Brigade Headquarters and the rest of the brigade left Lamai on 29 May and, after brushing off minor oppositions, reached Loihinche on the evening of 3 June.

Before leaving Lamai, Brigadier Lentaigne had allowed faked documents to fall into Japanese hands in an attempt to deceive them into expecting further attacks in the Hopin area during the monsoon. A Royal Air Force detachment with a small party of Burma Rifles was left behind at Lamai whose task was to call for and bring down direct air support on the targets in the valley. This detachment achieved considerable success in directing planes on to the suitable targets in the railway corridor; on one occasion it caused the complete destruction of a passenger train carrying Japanese troops to Mogaung.

On 1 June, without waiting for the rest of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade to arrive at Loihinche, the Commander 3/6 Gurkha Rifles took the initiative by attacking and capturing Lakum (6633) and the base over the hills to the west. The Japanese offered only light opposition at the village and the base was undefended. Gurkha's "speed and boldness had paid hands down".<sup>14</sup> When the brigade commander reached Loihinche on 3 June, the initial supply-drop for the assault on the town was already taking place. Lakum had also, in the meantime, been established as a secure base from which an assault was to be launched on Mogaung. From the Lakum base it was possible to see right across the Mogaung plain up to the town itself. In the left foreground was the Wetthauk Chaung (6434), reported to be unfordable by the patrols; on the right was the Tapaw—Pinhmi—Mogaung road. The brigade commander decided that his main assault should be put in along this road. The attack was launched accordingly, and during the next four days slow but steady progress was made by the brigade after very hard fighting. On 4 June, a detachment of Lancashire Fusiliers accompanied by some Kachins and Burma Rifles, totalling about 60 men, was sent to capture and hold Tapaw ferry, seven miles due east of Mogaung over the Mogaung river. After a stiff skirmish the Allied party drove off the small Japanese garrison consisting of 10 men, killing at least three. A few days later ranger boats with outboard motors and some parachute operators were dropped at Tapaw successfully. This was done in order that the brigade might, if neces-

<sup>14</sup> Narrative of Operations, 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 47.



sary, "cross the Mogaung river, or establish an evacuation route to Myitkyina, if required".<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile 1 South Staffords cleared the way along the ridge as far as the peak, east of Pinhmi, while a company of 3/6 Gurkha Rifles was ordered to attack along the eastern edge of the hills. The Gurkha company moved cautiously through the jungle at the bottom of the hills and most of the men reached within grenade throwing distance of the Japanese, who were occupying a strongly dug-in wired position at the top of the pass. At a given word everyone threw grenades and fired his weapons into the Japanese enclosure and then overran their positions killing 4 or 5 of them out of a platoon of 40. The Japanese officer tried to rally his men in order to recapture the lost position, but was himself wounded in the attempt.

About the same time Uhman Taung (6736), situated to the north-east of Pinhmi and then being used by the Japanese as an observation post, was also taken. Gurkha Village, one mile north of Lakum, was occupied and since the latter was being constantly shelled by the Japanese artillery, the newly captured village became the main base for the brigade; and a light-plane strip was constructed in the area for the evacuation of the wounded to Myitkyina airfield. The strip was wet and capable of use only in fine weather at first; later, someone had the "brainwave of dropping cocoanut matting" which kept the air-strip open in all kinds of weather.

On 6 June, 1 Lancashire Fusiliers attacked Pinhmi along the axis of the road. After some difficult fighting and a very uncomfortable night, the village was finally cleared by 7 June and the line of the Wetthauk Chaung—Pinhmi was reached. The Allied force captured about 20 large dumps of ammunition, two Field Hospitals complete with equipment and about 10 or 15 lorries. Many dead bodies of the Japanese were found in the dug-outs, and some of those captured alive were so infuriated at having been left behind that they offered to change sides.

The road on either side of Pinhmi bridge, the next objective of 1 Lancashire Fusiliers, ran along the embankment, with flood and marshy land to the left and right. The bridge was 150 feet in length and the Japanese were well dug-in. Two attacks by the column on 8 June were both beaten back and the commander of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was forced to find another route to Mogaung across the Wetthauk Chaung. A ford was discovered over the Wetthauk, and at dawn on 9 June 3/6 Gurkha Rifles, followed by Advance Brigade Headquarters and 1 South Staffords, crossed the chaung, their first objective being Mahaung (6335) and the Railway Station. This plan was ambitious but in view of the

<sup>15</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 20.



appreciation that the Japanese had no well-organised resistance, the brigade commander had decided that the risk was worth taking. The Gurkhas, by adopting excellent field-craft and tactics, surprised the garrison of Mahaung, and captured the village. The Staffords, on the other hand, encountered the Japanese in a bamboo clump near Ywathitkale (6435); and after overcoming stiff resistance they took the town and later established a block on the road to the north-east.

During the night of 9/10 June, one company of the Gurkhas based on Mahaung carried out extensive patrolling between Mogaung railway station and Kyaingyi. The other two companies had moved to the road-block established by the South Staffords, and on the morning of 10 June they attacked Pinhmi bridge from the rear. The first attack was thrown back by the Japanese but in the second attack the Gurkhas took the bridge, killing 35 men and capturing one medium machine-gun.

The brigade now held a firm front stretching from Pinhmi bridge to Mahaung. So far, the defence by the Japanese had been stiff but unco-ordinated. They were strong in artillery, but their infantry was scattered about in isolated platoon positions. These could be mopped up individually but not before casualties had been suffered by the attackers. In the Mogaung operations the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade had lost 5 officers and 53 other ranks killed, and 13 officers and 166 other ranks wounded. At the same time, the Japanese at Mogaung were still being steadily reinforced. Two battalions, one from the north and the other from the south, entered Mogaung on 12 June; while their forward elements must have arrived a day or two earlier. The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, therefore, met with stiff resistance when it pressed on with its attacks on 11 and 12 June.

3/6 Gurkha Rifles was allowed to rest after the severe strain on 10 June, while 1 Lancashire Fusiliers was ordered to attack up to the Court House (6435) triangle which was formed by the Pinhmi road, a track to the north and the base of a stream. On either side of the triangle was open valley. At the same time 1 South Staffords was to make an attempt to reach the Mogaung river and secure the right flank of the brigade. After a long protracted fight which lasted the whole of a very hot day, Lancashire Fusiliers out-manoeuvred and killed the entire Japanese platoon in the triangle. The success of this unit was largely due to its superior fire power and great strength in numbers. The Staffords, on the other hand, had a harder time although they succeeded in making their way through the swamps. On arrival near the river, tired and exhausted, they were engaged by a Japanese force; in view of this resistance, the Staffords were unable to establish themselves firmly on the river bank. Sometime



later, an attack on the Japanese positions was put in which succeeded in driving them out temporarily, but the Allies could not consolidate their position that day. On 12 June, however, a combined attack was launched by 3/6 Gurkha Rifles and 1 South Staffords which enabled the Allies to secure the river bank. From here, the brigade was within 800 yards of the railway bridge and was in a position to cover it effectively by medium machine-gun fire.

All the three battalions were by then very tired. The 77th Indian Infantry Brigade held a firm line from the river to Ywathitkale (the Gurkha company having been withdrawn from Mahaung), hence its commander decided to rest his men for a few days till the expected Chinese reinforcements had arrived. One platoon was stationed at Pinhmi and the Chinese Volunteer platoon protected the dropping area and the light-plane strip at Gurkha Village.

After the establishment of the Allied line between Ywathitkale-Mogaung river, there followed a short, static period during which a "Blader" detachment was flown in to Myitkyina with twelve Lifebuoy flame throwers to assist in the final attack of Mogaung. The Japanese were at this time strongly entrenched at the village of Natgyigon and had an excellent observation post at Naungkaiktaw which faced the Allied platoon positions at Ywathitkale. On the Mogaung river bank, the Japanese positions were within 200 yards of the Gurkhas in a narrow sweep of cover in a village.

It was considered essential that the brigade should keep up its initiative and continue to impose its will on the Japanese. All battalions, therefore, kept up offensive patrolling by night and shot up or grenaded Japanese positions, while Allied planes bombed and strafed their strong-points by day. The Japanese retaliated by putting down extremely accurate artillery fire on the Allied positions from Naungkaiktaw, which caused between 10 and 15 casualties every day. These had to be evacuated to the Allied base at Gurkha village, where as many as 250 wounded personnel had collected. Constant fighting had reduced the strength of each battalion and the combined strength of Rifle companies was down to 550 all ranks. Hence the commander of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was, at this stage, forced to send a message to the Special Force Headquarters stating that he could not hold his existing positions indefinitely, with his brigade gradually wasting away as a result of Japanese shelling, and due to losses by patrolling and sickness. He was thereupon instructed not to take any undue risks which might "write off the Brigade" and was permitted to withdraw to the hills east of Pinhmi, if necessary, while waiting for the arrival of Chinese reinforcements.

A limited withdrawal to Pinhmi was made by 1 Lancashire Fusiliers and 1 South Staffords on 15 June, but the Japanese were also



exhausted and had to withdraw a few hundred yards nearer the railway at about the same time. Gurkha patrols followed them up, and by the end of the day the forward line of the brigade had been advanced another 200 yards along the right flank.

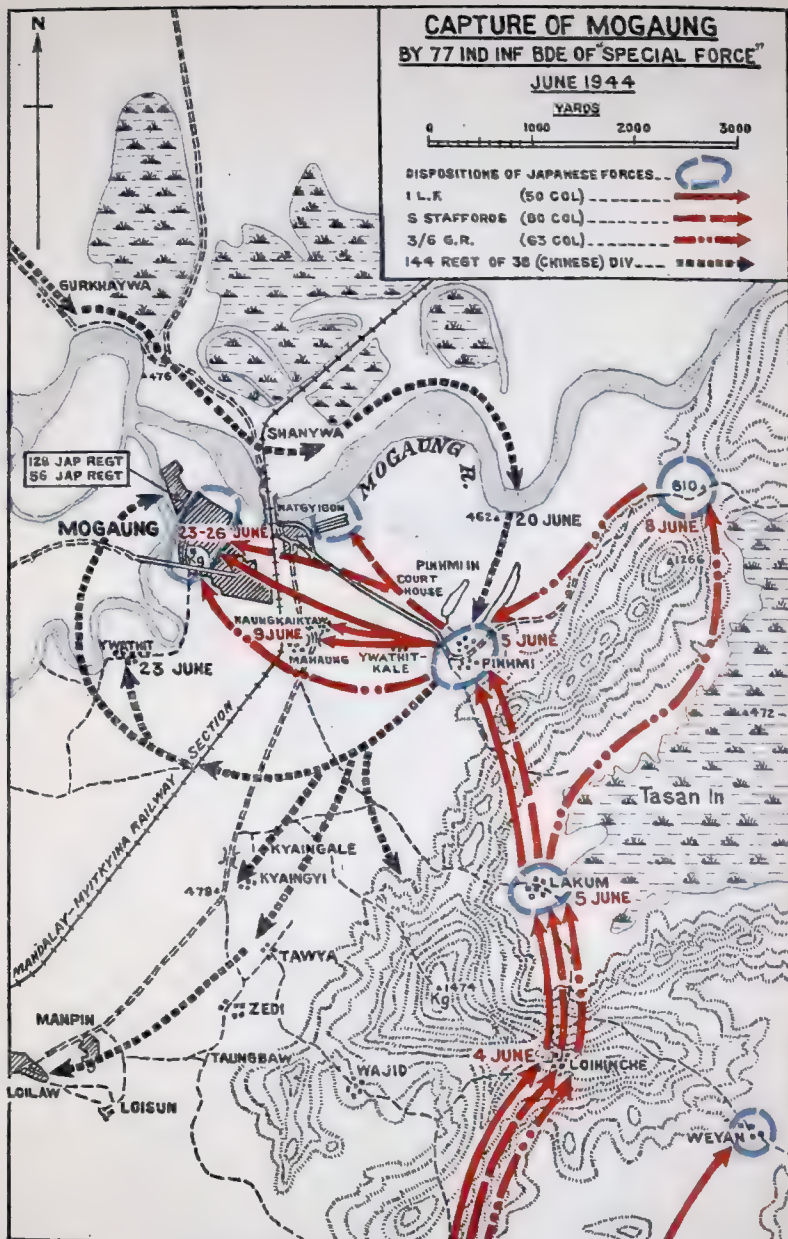
On 17 June, in preparation for the final assault for the capture of Mogaung, the commander of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade decided to take the village of Naungkaikaw from where the Japanese were continuously bringing down accurate fire on the area, immediately west of Pinhmi. The attack was put in from the north by two companies of 1 Lancashire Fusiliers, assisted by two platoons of 82 Column. It went in as planned on the morning of 18 June, after the village had been heavily bombed by Allied planes on the previous day. After a heavy barrage of 400 mortar shells in only ten minutes, the two companies put in an attack with the help of flame-throwers and Piats. The Japanese, who were about 100 strong, broke up and withdrew quickly, leaving behind more than 40 dead. Allied casualties were equally heavy (they lost 16 killed and as many as 38 wounded), partly caused by their own supporting mortars in the initial phase of the attack.

At 1700 hours on the evening of 18 June, the first Chinese troops (1st Battalion, 114th Regiment) at last appeared on the north bank of Mogaung river. The same night the battalion started crossing over in six power driven ranger boats previously dropped at the ferry, six miles south-east of Mogaung. The 2nd Battalion of the Chinese Regiment, together with the Regimental Headquarters, arrived on the following day. These two battalions, together with the Chinese 75-mm. battery crossed over uneventfully, the latter taking up positions near Pinhmi.

Now that the brigade's left flank was protected by the Chinese, and the Japanese threatened from the south, the brigade commander made preparations for the final assault on Mogaung, before Japanese reinforcements could arrive in that place. With this end in view, on 20 June Mahaung was reoccupied by a platoon of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade without opposition. The village was taken over by a Chinese company on the same day, while the 2nd Battalion, 114th Regiment, moved to Loilaw to the south, mopping up some Japanese administrative personnel and capturing much booty.

On the evening of 21 June, over 70 sorties were flown by the Allied planes which were directed against the Japanese positions at Natogyigon, a keystone in the Japanese defence plan. According to Lieutenant-General Stilwell, the situation from the Allied point of view was "pretty good". On the morning of 22 June, the Chinese attack, south of Mogaung, was beaten off by the Japanese; nevertheless, the former managed to infiltrate between the two Japanese positions. The same day an abortive attempt to reach the railway







cost the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade 2 officers and 6 other ranks killed. The 113th Chinese Regiment then arrived on the north bank of the Mogaung river and the 3rd Battalion of the 114th Regiment, after handing over its positions, joined the rest of the regiment, south of Mogaung.

#### THE FALL OF MOGAUNG

On the morning of 23 June, the final attack on Mogaung began. 3/6 Gurkha Rifles and 1 South Staffords put in an attack shortly before dawn on the line of the river embankment from the bridge (632365) to the railway station (634357) as their first objective. An initial barrage of 1,000 mortar shells, which was intended to raise the morale of the Allied troops as also to inflict damage on the Japanese, paved the way for their advance. The Gurkha attack met with initial success and their officers showed "complete disregard for death".<sup>16</sup> Soon after dawn, the Gurkha Rifles captured the bridge and linked up with 1 South Staffords on the left. The latter had a difficult task to perform, since their advance had to be made across the open land before reaching the Japanese positions. Their right and centre flanks successfully reached the railway line, by-passing one or two Japanese positions, but their left flank was held up by a party of 20 Japanese with a medium machine-gun, who were stationed in a house. The brigade commander came quickly to the assistance of this company by reinforcing it by a company of Lancashire Fusiliers. With this additional help, all went well with the South Staffords. To quote Brigadier Calvert's report:—"We then turned everything we had on to the house whilst the flame-throwers were moving up. From Naungkaikaw the LF's fired 200 2-inch mortar shells at the house, some penetrating the windows. From the Staffords flank we brought Piats and 68 grenades into range which started knocking holes in the house. 3 or 4 MMGs also kept up a constant stream of bullets on all openings from a distance of about 300 yards. Before our flame-throwers and assaulting company reached them, the garrison fled leaving 5 or 6 dead."<sup>17</sup>

By 1200 hours on 23 June, the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade had established itself firmly on the line of the railway; its losses had been more than 50 dead and 100 wounded in the attack. Japanese casualties were about 60 dead, most of whom were from the *128th Regiment* and *56th Regiment*, as identifications later revealed. Brigadier Calvert was of the opinion that the morale of the *128th Regiment* was "very low", but that of the *56th Regiment* was high and they generally fought to the last.

The Chinese advancing from the south, in a slow and cautious

<sup>16</sup> Narrative of Operations, 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



manner, took Ywathit and linked up with the Lancashire Fusiliers at the railway station. The combined force then advanced about 200 yards west of the station with the help of mortar-fire. On the same day, Brigadier Calvert sent his advance company and anti-tank personnel forward to a line about 400 yards west of the railway. In spite of intense shelling by the Japanese the Allied casualties were low.

On 24 June, but for the move of a platoon of Gurkhas to the north end of the railway bridge, no further advance was made. This was slow progress indeed and the brigade commander rightly called for direct air support in order to speed up the advance of the forces. The Japanese positions in some of the bigger houses in the area were heavily bombed, only 200 yards in front of the Allied forward troops. At the end of the day the brigade held a line stretching from 630366 to 631358 with the Chinese on its left and in touch with 1 Lancashire Fusiliers.

A further advance was made by the Chinese, Lancashire Fusiliers and Headquarters 77th Indian Infantry Brigade Advance Company on 25 June. The Chinese began their advance at 1700 hours and were accompanied by the Lancashire Fusiliers. About 12 Japanese in a dug-out were killed in a surprise attack and one platoon succeeded in reaching the Namyin Chaung, but with the withdrawal of the Chinese owing to some unknown reason, the line was established for the night 250 yards east of the Chaung; and the Gurkha Rifles moved in support of this position. The following day (26 June) the Chinese crept forward again and reported that there was no Japanese force in their immediate front, as far as Namyin Chaung. A company of Gurkha Rifles also advanced carefully and found that the Japanese had abandoned Mogaung, which was promptly occupied by the Allies. Mopping up of isolated Japanese troops continued on the next day. Before they finally abandoned Mogaung, the Japanese had flung every sort of shell and mortar bombs at the Allies which caused a large number of casualties and prevented the latter from interrupting Japanese final withdrawal.

With the capture of Mogaung ended Brigadier Calvert's part in this expedition. His brigade was sadly reduced in strength on account of casualties, in being killed and wounded, and owing to the prevalence of diseases like malaria, dysentery etc., the troops were not at all in a good condition to continue fighting, although Lieutenant-General Stilwell sorely needed every available soldier.

On 27 June, the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to hand over its positions to the 38th Chinese Division and move to the hills east of Pinhmi.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 22.



## CHAPTER XX

# The End of Special Force Operations

### OPERATIONS AROUND INDAWGYI LAKE

The capture of Mogaung was a spectacular success for the Special Force. Although it had no remarkable success to its credit, during the last phase of operations its units inflicted considerable damage on the Japanese lines of communication and engaged several battalions on a wide front.

With the fall of "Blackpool" on 25 May 1944, it had become vital to safeguard the approaches to Indawgyi Lake with the object of evacuating casualties without interference from the Japanese. It was intended that the majority of the casualties suffered by the three Allied brigades were to be flown out from the lake in the first instance. Later, when the area between Indawgyi Lake and Kamaing had been cleared, casualties were expected to be evacuated by power-driven craft down the Indaw river. Although the Chinese had succeeded in establishing a block at Seton as early as 27 May, it was not possible to use the river route until 1 July. In the meanwhile the 14th Brigade and the 3rd West African Brigade strengthened their grip on Kyusanlai Pass. The 14th Brigade was based on Nammun from where columns had been posted in the pass and were being relieved at regular intervals as living conditions in the pass during the monsoon were very difficult; leeches and mosquitoes being particularly annoying.<sup>1</sup> Between 27 and 31 May, columns of these two brigades carried out extensive patrolling in a very energetic manner and were responsible for depleting the Japanese ranks. On 30 May, 74 Column annihilated a Japanese outpost four miles south-east of Hkaungtung, and on the following day 19 Japanese were killed by 29 Column, just north of the pass. The 111th Indian Infantry Brigade Headquarters reassumed command of its columns on 31 May with orders to protect the northern half of the Indawgyi Lake, until all casualties were cleared. At the same time, the 14th Brigade was given the task of protecting the southern half of the lake and of carrying out a limited offensive in the Mogaung valley.<sup>2</sup> During the first week of June, the 14th Brigade continued its patrolling in the Kyusanlai Pass area and protecting both the flying-boat stages on the lake. Thereafter, the brigade received orders

<sup>1</sup> Narrative of Operations, 14th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 20.



to leave only a small force at the pass, while the remainder of the brigade was to undertake operations against the main rail and road between Ywathit and Pinlon.

At about the same time, the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade occupied positions around the northern half of Indawgyi Lake in anticipation of an early evacuation. The brigade was not considered fit for further offensive operations, but in view of the shortage of troops it was ordered to move north-east to the Pahok-Sawma area on 7/8 June. Its role, there, was to destroy the Japanese positions, blow up dumps and prevent their movement northward. On 10 June, the brigade (less 6 Nigeria Regiment) set off north and four days later all its columns arrived at Lakhra, to the south-west of Seton. 6 Nigeria Regiment remained in the hills south-east of Mokso Sakan arriving at Lakhra on 29 June. For the rest of the month of June the activities of the brigade were confined to a series of patrol actions only. The Japanese fully defended the exits from the hills and it required a major operation to dislodge them from their defensive positions. Attempts by various columns to by-pass these defences did not succeed owing to the difficult nature of the country.

In the meantime, a new force was created under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Howell, known as Howforce. Its main purpose was to superintend the evacuation and look after the supply of troops by utilising the waterways as the line of communication. Boats and motors were either brought in by Sunderlands or dropped by parachute, for use down the river as far north as Kamaing and then by river to the American Dakota strip at Warazup. However, the organisation could not start functioning before 1 July.

Up to 16 June, over 500 casualties were successfully flown out from Indawgyi Lake by Sunderland flying boats, but during the period 16 to 29 June, no casualties were evacuated. This was due to extremely bad weather and unserviceability of aircraft. However, casualty evacuation started again on 30 June, and by 6 July about 145 sick and wounded were flown out to India.

Under orders from the Headquarters Chinese Armies in India, the 14th Brigade abandoned Kyusanlai Pass on 21 June. Before leaving the pass, the road was effectively blocked by demolitions, the whole area was booby-trapped and the bridge over a small chaung north of Zigon was also blown. By 24 June, the brigade was dispersed with Advance Brigade Headquarters, 2 Black Watch and 2 York & Lancaster in and around Mokso Sakan; 1 Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire to the north-west of Chaungwa; and 7 Leicesters operating against Japanese communications south-west of Pinlon. On the same day the Headquarters 3rd West African



Brigade reassumed command of the two West African battalions which were till then with the 14th Brigade.

#### OPERATIONS WEST OF MOGAUNG

Between 14 June and 23 July, the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade was engaged in a series of minor operations in the general area Lakhran, Loinam Sawngka, Pyindaw and Point 2171. A similar role was taken up between Pyindaw and Taungni Bum, by the 3rd West African Brigade and later by the 14th Brigade. All these operations were designed to isolate the Japanese garrison at Myitkyina, who were then defending the place heroically.

The first important action in this area took place on 19-20 June, when 30 Column of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade encountered strong Japanese opposition at Loinam Sawngka. After two separate attacks had failed to dislodge the Japanese, the Gurkhas finally captured the village in the third attempt. It was, however, reoccupied by the Japanese on 27 June after a heavy bombardment of Allied positions. On the same day, the brigade received orders to divert its attention to the road and railway as soon as possible.

By this time, the three British battalions of the brigade were each down to a fighting strength of one company. Moreover 95% of the troops were suffering from the effects or after-effects of malaria, jaundice, and jungle sores.<sup>3</sup> The brigade was thus unfit for further operations but the troops continued to fight gallantly for another four weeks before evacuation. A road-block was established by 93 Column (3/9 Gurkha Rifles) on the track south-west of Pahok on 27 June, while 1 and 2 King's Own carried out offensive patrolling in the same area, and 1 Cameronians and 30 Column moved to the road south of Pyindaw.

Meanwhile, about the middle of June, columns of the 3rd West African Brigade started moving further north. The Advance Brigade Headquarters and 7 Nigeria Regiment left the Indawgyi Lake area on 12 June, but while waiting for a supply-drop *en route*, they were attacked by two Japanese platoons with a mortar. After an engagement lasting 24 hours the attack was driven off. Later, after a few patrol clashes, they arrived in Pahok area by the end of June. Here they were joined by 12 Nigeria Regiment which, after leaving Kyusanlai Pass on 12 June, climbed the range of hills between Indawgyi and the railway valley and arrived in Pahok on 2 July. Two days later, 6 Nigeria Regiment after a few patrol clashes joined the rest of the brigade. The brigade was thus

<sup>3</sup> Narrative of Operations, 111th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 5.



concentrated and was functioning as a compact unit for the first time since it had landed in Northern Burma.

Early in July, orders were given to the three brigades for co-ordinated attacks on the Japanese lines of communication; the 14th Brigade was to attack Pinlon-Pinbaw area with all the available Rifle companies while the columns composed of administrative elements, which were later named "M Force", were sent to Pahok. The 3rd West African Brigade was to attack Pyindaw on or about 8 July and the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade, in collaboration with the 3rd West African Brigade, was to capture Kyungon.

The West African Brigade left Pahok on 8 July led by 7 Nigeria Regiment, followed by the Brigade Headquarters and 6 and 12 Nigeria Regiments. The last of these contacted a wired company position near Mia, which was abandoned by the Japanese after a fairly heavy fight. The attack on Pyindaw was launched at dawn on 11 July. A brisk exchange of fire followed, and not until both the sides had suffered casualties was it discovered that the brigade was attacking a party of Chinese who had already occupied the village. The next day the Allies attacked the Japanese hill-position (three miles south-west of Pyindaw) after waiting for direct air support which never materialised. Fighting lasted throughout the day, and just before dusk a small party of 12 Nigeria Regiment reached the objective, but was later forced to withdraw by a determined Japanese counter-attack. On 14 July the hill was again attacked, but the attack failed in the face of heavy opposition and lack of air support. From 18 July onwards direct air support improved and as many as 16 Mustangs a day were directed on to the targets indicated by the brigade. By this time, the 72nd Brigade of the 30th Division had arrived and planned to attack the hill feature on 5 August. The brigade succeeded in capturing the position and the West Africans took over the ground gained. On 8 August, it occupied Sahmaw where it remained in position until 13 August when its evacuation began.

We may now turn to the operations carried out by the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade. The brigade, with orders to capture Point 2171 which overlooked the village. On 7 July, 30 Column (3/4 Gurkha Rifles) arrived in the area and clashed with the Japanese patrols almost immediately. In the evening Advance Brigade Headquarters, 1 Kings and 93 Column (less one company) also reached the area. The next day (8 July) 30 Column attacked the Japanese force occupying Point 2171 forcing it to withdraw slowly.

93 Column (3/9 Gurkha Rifles) took over from 30 Column on



9 July, and by midday the direct assault company was in contact with the main Japanese defences of Point 2171. Simultaneously, a second Gurkha company attempted to take the feature from the rear and immediately came under close and accurate Japanese fire. But for the heroism and fine example set by Major Blaker of 3/9 Gurkha Rifles, who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, it is doubtful if the position could have been taken. Inspired by his example the Gurkhas pressed on with the attack, forcing the Japanese to withdraw from the feature after losing about 50 of their numbers.

The commander of the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade thereupon decided to wait for the arrival of 41 Column and the remaining company of 93 Column before attempting to take Kyungon. In the meantime, the Japanese had brought in reinforcements of troops and artillery, with the help of which they effectively blocked all the routes leading to Point 2171. As a result, neither 41 Column nor the company of 93 Column was able to break through. After 13 July, Japanese activity in the area increased considerably. Several probing attacks were made on the brigade's positions, which were being frequently mortared and shelled. On 17 July, two attacks were beaten off by the brigade which resulted in heavy casualties to both sides. Next day another heavy attack by two Japanese companies was repulsed, in the course of which the attackers lost 70 killed. The brigade was greatly handicapped in the attack on this feature by the complete failure of air support due to heavy rains and "to a sudden reorganisation of the U.S.A.A.F. command, control and system of allocation of tasks, brought about by the serious situation at Myitkyina".<sup>4</sup>

The brigade was not in a fit condition to continue the fight and the acting brigade commander, therefore, asked for permission to withdraw. But General Stilwell, under whom the remnants of the Special Force had now come, refused to permit their withdrawal. General Lentaigne, who as successor to General Wingate had inherited the latter's authority to communicate directly with Lord Mountbatten, wrote to the Supreme Allied Commander: "... the whole force is now worn out, both physically and mentally and to keep them in close contact with the enemy indefinitely until a particular objective is made good is really not practical politics."<sup>5</sup>

In view of this, the permission to evacuate the brigade was granted by Lord Mountbatten. The withdrawal from Pt. 2171 had already been completed without interference from the Japanese by the evening of 19 July. Four days later the whole brigade, less 26

<sup>4</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> File 7069, CIS Historical Section.



Column, was concentrated in a small village, two miles east of Pahok. 26 Column was then at Lakhra from where it was eventually flown out.

#### MORRIS FORCE OPPOSITE MYITKYINA

The failure of Morris Force to take Waingmaw in its attacks of 29 May to 2 June was followed shortly afterwards by an order for the force to by-pass the place and operate in the area to the north of Maingna. By 9 June taking advantage of impromptu air support, 94 Column had captured a small village adjacent to, and a quarter of a mile south of, Maingna. The force was then ordered to take Maingna itself; and on the morning of 10 June, 40 Column and 4/9 Gurkha Rifles, whose two columns were in the process of amalgamation, attacked the village with their total strength. Little was, however, achieved by this attack. After some initial success the force was for the most part compelled to withdraw with some losses. After the failure of the attack, 40 and 94 Columns were amalgamated to form one column. From this period onwards to the middle of July, Morris Force continued to harass the Japanese in and around Maingna and succeeded in cutting Japanese lines of communication at a number of places. The second attack on Maingna met with better success and the northern half of the village was occupied. Reduced however to a total strength of 10 weak rifle platoons, Morris Force was unable to consolidate its gain. Several Japanese counter-attacks were repulsed, but on the evening of 20-21 June all forward troops had to be withdrawn to the north end of the village.

Thereafter, on 22 June, Dah Force, less elements retained by Morris Force for further operations, was completely evacuated from the operational area.<sup>6</sup> The reduced Morris Force was ordered to confine itself to offensive patrolling, keeping the Allied forces at Myitkyina informed of all Japanese moves east of the Irrawaddy. The force could do little more. A medical examination at this time revealed that 200 men, who had not reported sick, were suffering from malaria. A large number of sick personnel was evacuated in mid-July, by which time the force was reduced to a strength of 9 officers and 7 Rifles Sections. Brigadier Lentaigne on arrival in their midst ordered the complete evacuation of the force. The main body of the force was flown out on 15/16 July, while one platoon was left behind to hand over to the northern Kachin Levies. The last troops finally left Myitkyina on 29 July.

For four and a half months Morris Force had successfully operated on the Bhamo-Myitkyina lines of communication, causing many

<sup>6</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 22.



casualties and considerable dislocation of supplies by road. In the words of its commander, "there is no doubt that the Force played its small part to the full, and can claim its share in the results which will reduce by one year the time required for the final extermination of the Jap menace."<sup>7</sup>

#### EVACUATION OF SPECIAL FORCE

With the capture of Mogaung on 26 June, the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade, the most heavily engaged of all Special Force brigades retired to the hills east of Pinhmi. On 5/6 July, its commander was given the choice of marching out at once to Warazup to be flown out from there or awaiting the arrival of the 36th British Division, which had been given orders to relieve the Special Force, and then being flown out from Myitkyina. He chose the former. The brigade after marching northwards concentrated at Warazup by 16/17 July. Between 16-19 July, the whole brigade was evacuated by air to India.

It has already been stated that the 111th Indian Infantry Brigade had concentrated east of Pahok on 23 July. From here the brigade marched to Mogaung, entrained for Myitkyina and was flown out to India between 29 July and 1 August. A small detachment of Gurkhas, the only fit men in the brigade, was formed into a composite company known as 111 Company. For a period of four weeks the Gurkhas carried out guard duties for an American Casualty Clearing Station at Pahok.

Thus, by 1 August, the 14th Brigade and the 3rd West African Brigade were the only operational formations of Special Force remaining in Burma. During July-August the 14th Brigade carried out many minor but successful operations north and south of Taungni Bum, due west of Kyungon. Pungan was captured from the Japanese on 21 July; Taungni Bum was taken by 74 Column on 2 August; and Point 2171 was finally occupied by 16 and 61 Columns on 12 August. In the meantime the Allied forces had occupied the great Japanese base at Myitkyina, the capture of which was greatly facilitated by operations of the Special Force, and which marked the virtual end of the war in Northern Burma.

By the middle of August, the 36th British Division had arrived in the Myitkyina area and was ready to move south for operations against the Japanese. With the arrival of this division, the task allotted to the Special Force at last came to an end. On 17/18 August, the West African Brigade was flown out; the 14th Brigade followed between 21 and 26 August. Both these brigades were

<sup>7</sup> Narrative of Operations, Morris Force, p. 8.



evacuated from Myitkyina as also Howforce and the Gurkha 111 Company, which were finally evacuated on 27 August, 1944.

#### CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made to give a connected account of the operations of Special Force in the preceding pages. It now remains to consider their success or failure in Northern Burma. Divergent views have been expressed about the work of the Chindits and from the conflicting mass of material, both published and unpublished, it is difficult to form a clear picture.

Both the Chindit expeditions have been mainly criticised on the ground that they failed to affect the main trend of the battle for the reconquest of Burma. It is, however, often forgotten that the Chindits were primarily trained to carry out an offensive role and, through no fault of theirs, had to carry out a task not originally expected of them. When the first Chindit expedition was launched in 1943 the commander knew that the expected Allied offensive was not likely to materialise. The case was different when for the second time operations had to be carried out. The great Japanese offensive against Manipur, which began soon after the initial landings of the brigades of the Special Force, made it impossible to exploit, by means of a full-blooded offensive, the advantage derived from the long range penetrations. The Special Force undoubtedly failed to affect in a large measure the Japanese plans, but in fairness it must be said that the Japanese offensive radically changed the strategic situation on which Wingate had based his plans.

With a view to arriving at a just estimate of the Chindits, it is necessary to sum up their achievements in the light of the original directive issued to them on the eve of operations. They had been given three assignments, which they were able to carry out more or less successfully. The first of these tasks was to help the advance of Lieutenant-General Stilwell's force in its southward drive on Kamaing-Mogaung-Myitkyina. This task was achieved in the first place by the establishment of the "White City" stronghold on the road and railway at Henu, which they held for the best part of two months and the consequent inability of the Japanese to supply and reinforce adequately their *18th Division*. It was a "bitter blow" to the Chindits when they were asked to abandon the stronghold and move north, but exigencies of war perhaps made it necessary.

Secondly, the Chindits captured the great Japanese base at Mogaung, one of the three towns, the conquest of which was considered essential by Lieut-General Stilwell in order to clear the Japanese from Northern Burma. In addition, by their operations the Chindits engaged a force of about 10,000 Japanese, half of which



number they claimed as casualties. Moreover, by destroying large stocks of food and ammunition dumps and disorganising the main lines of communication of the Japanese *18th Division*, they helped in a large measure the advance of the Chinese force from the north. It is on record that when the British 36th Division advanced south from Myitkyina in August and September 1944, it came across innumerable bodies of Japanese soldiers who had died of starvation and disease. This can be mainly attributed "to laying waste of all dumps and the destruction of communications from Namkan through Indaw northwards".<sup>8</sup>

In the third place, the operations of Morris Force, east of the Irrawaddy, imposed severe limitations on the scale of Japanese supplies and reinforcements to their garrison at Myitkyina. It is difficult to say how far the almost complete stoppage of supplies through the Bhamo-Myitkyina road, and interruption of traffic on the Irrawaddy, affected the fate of the Japanese garrison, since they were certainly receiving reinforcements through other routes. Even when the actual surrender took place, the remnants of the Japanese *18th Division* managed to escape through the Allied ranks. However, these operations had considerable effect in raising the morale of the Chinese forces and in inducing them to undertake operations far away from their bases. For some time the Kachins also came under the full sway of the Allied Force, but the high hopes which were initially raised in their hearts could not be sustained when the time for evacuation of the force from Northern Burma came.

Fourthly, the operations of the Special Force created a good deal of confusion in the minds of the Japanese. Many small columns operated over a wide area, pulling down telephone and telegraph wires, destroying food and ammunition, ambushing transport, mining the roads and laying booby-traps. The Japanese were forced, therefore, to disperse their forces.

The second task assigned to the Special Force was that of creating a favourable situation for the Chinese Expeditionary Force to advance westwards from Yunnan across the Salween. This was mainly achieved by the operations of Morris Force beyond the Irrawaddy. On 15 May, 1944, a communique from Chungking announced that Chinese forces had crossed the Salween on a broad front.

Finally, a new task was allotted to the Special Force after the great Japanese offensive against Manipur had been launched. This was to harass Japanese lines of communication which supplied Japanese troops on the IV Corps front. Though in the Indaw area a serious attempt was made to stop Japanese reinforcements reaching

<sup>8</sup> Report on Operations of Special Force, p. 37.



their troops, it had little effect, although the 14th and 11th Brigades destroyed large quantities of stores. As General Giffard puts it:—"They delayed for one month upto three battalions of the 15th Division, which might otherwise have reached the Imphal front earlier."<sup>9</sup>

In spite of these achievements to its credit, it was widely felt that money and labour spent on the Special Force was out of proportion to its achievements. The estimate that the Force paid only a five per cent dividend is perhaps not far from the truth. On the other hand, the idea of Long Range Penetration, whether in the jungles of Burma or in the sandy deserts of North Africa, has probably come to stay. Its form and the details of the technique may vary according to the requirements of each case and the development of new equipment like vertical-take-off aircraft and better food pills. Its real usefulness will probably be in conjunction with a strategic, swift-moving offensive rather than as an isolated or delaying operation. Wingate always thought "in terms of the offensive" and his views on the potentialities of Long Range Penetration technique certainly appear prophetic.

The Chindits fully demonstrated once again that Indian and British troops were a match for the soldiers of any other nationality. It required extraordinary courage and endurance to face nature and sickness in the jungles of Burma. The wounded and the sick had often to wait for several days for the planes to evacuate them and in the meantime to continue marching and fighting. While every Chindit tried his utmost to be useful to his force, it is also true that during the later stages of fighting his efficiency had greatly suffered. "Medical examinations of the men, on their withdrawal showed that more than 50 per cent were unfit for active service."<sup>10</sup> "So soldiers and airmen drawn haphazard from the towns and villages of Britain, India, Africa and America, of all kinds and races, and of varying ages, stuck it out through one of the hardest campaigns in history. Whatever else he did, Wingate made men see a star above the battlefield."<sup>11</sup>

The operations described in these chapters brought the war in Burma to its decisive turning point. By the midsummer of 1944, the reconquest of Burma had become clearly a matter of time only. The great Japanese 'grand design' against Imphal had disastrously failed. The Allies had proved themselves capable of withstanding all attacks on Imphal and Kohima, of supplying and reinforcing their besieged troops by air, and of finally recapturing Kohima and breaking through to Imphal. The massive air superiority which was

<sup>9</sup> Giffard's Despatch on Operation in Burma and North-East India, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Mountbatten's Report, p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> *The Campaign in Burma*, p. 79.



largely responsible for these successes also made possible the operations of a large force against the Japanese communication and rear areas. Due to their inferiority in weapons and equipment, and shattering losses of manpower in all their forward divisions, the Japanese had to fall back steadily from Imphal and Myitkyina to Mandalay and Rangoon. Those operations will form the subject of the second volume of the 'Reconquest of Burma.'







## APPENDICES







# APPENDIX 1

## ORGANIZATION OF A CHINDITS COLUMN

		BOs.	VCOs.	BORs.	BAORs.	IORs or GORs	Totals
(a) British Units.							
Column Headquarters	...	{ 1 (Maj.)	...	4	...	2	7
	...	{ 1 (Sub.)	...	...	...	...	1
R.A.F. Section	...	1 (Fl./Lt)	...	4	...	...	5
Medical	...	1	...	2	...	2	5
Regimental Signallers	...	...	...	3	...	3	6
R.C. of S. Det.	...	...	...	5	...	...	5
Sabotage Group	...	1	...	18	...	10	29
Burma Rifle Platoon	...	2	2	...	41	...	45
Infantry Company	...	5	...	110	...	...	115
Support Group	...	1	...	30	...	...	31
2nd line Transport	...	1	1	...	...	55	57
Totals	...	14	3	176	41	72	306

(b) Gurkha Columns.							
Column Headquarters	...	{ 1 (Maj.)	...	...	...	6	7
	...	{ 1 (Sub.)	...	...	...	...	1
R.A.F. Section	...	1 (Fl./Lt)	...	4	...	...	5
Medical	...	1	...	...	...	4	5
Regimental Signallers	...	...	...	3	...	3	6
R.C. of S. Det.	...	...	...	5	...	2	7
Sabotage Group	...	1	...	18	...	10	29
Burma Rifles Platoon	...	2	2	...	41	...	45
Infantry Company	...	2	4	...	...	160	166
Support Group	...	...	1	...	...	40	41
2nd line Transport	...	1	1	...	...	55	57
Totals	...	10	8	30	41	280	369

**Note:** The higher figure for the Gurkha Columns was due to the fact that they took their first reinforcements into the Field with them. There were no first reinforcements for the British Columns. Followers were taken into the field at Column Commanders' discretion.



## APPENDIX 2

### THE CHINDITS

#### *Proclamation to Headmen of Villages where wounded were deposited*

To the Headman of . . . . . Village.

Greetings. I, the Commander of British and Burmese forces fighting to defend Burma against the Japanese intrusion, and to restore health, happiness and freedom to the inhabitants, leave with you these soldiers, wounded in the defence of your country. I know that you will treat them kindly and nurse them back to health, finally delivering them safely to the British Government. To assist you to do this, I have given you money and presents.

The names of these men and the name of your village and your own name, I have told to the British Government by wireless. They will send soldiers to enquire after them. You must be able to give a good account of them when the soldiers arrive. Should any bad men in your village or neighbourhood either ill-treat our wounded or betray them to the enemy, Beware. I shall hear of it and I shall send upon you punishment from our mighty Air Forces and you will be destroyed. But if you keep away such bad men and preserve the lives of our wounded then we will liberally reward you.

Do not be afraid, we have come to help you and not to hurt you. If these men die in spite of your kindness, you will bury them near the village keeping their property for us on our return, as a sign that you have treated them well. All will not die, one at least will live, and he will give evidence on your behalf.

If you will produce this letter to the Commanders of British forces and prove that you have done what we have told you, they will reward you.



## APPENDIX 3

### 4 CORPS OPERATION ORDER NO. 7

3 MARCH 1944

#### *Defence of 4 Corps H.Q. against Land Attack*

1. 4 Corps Operation Order No. 6 dated 4 Dec. 1943 is cancelled.

#### INFORMATION

##### *Enemy*

2. May at any time attempt a raid on Corps H.Q. area with the intention amongst others to destroy H.Q. 4 Corps. Unlikely that large enemy force can penetrate to Corps H.Q. area without prior information reaching us. Small parties or airborne troops may, however, attack with little or no notice. It is considered that the most likely time of attack for such forces would be at night or, in the case of airborne troops, early morning.

##### *Own Tps.*

3. Following are available for defence of Corps H.Q. area:—

- (a) Corps H.Q. Def Coy.
- (b) Personnel of Corps H.Q.
- (c) Personnel of Sigs 4 Corps in Corps H.Q. area.

#### INTENTION

4. Enemy attacking the Corps H.Q. will be destroyed and work resumed as quickly as possible.

#### METHOD

##### *Degrees of Preparedness*

5. The degrees of preparedness will be as follows:—

- (a) Normal
- (b) Precautionary
- (c) Action Stations.

There is, however, no guarantee that the progress of operations will allow a precautionary period to intervene between Normal and Action stations.

- (a) *Normal.* During this period the normal guards will be mounted by day and night. By day, police posts will operate at the entrances to the Corps H.Q. area. By night, a system of patrols will be established on the perimeter and on the roads through Camp.

- (b) *Precautionary.* The following additional precautions will be taken:—

- (i) All officers under the rank of Lt.-Col. and other ranks normally armed with pistols, will be issued with and will carry a rifle, bayonet and amn or machine carbine. These will be issued as other priorities admit,



- (ii) Strong points will be manned 10% by day and 30% by night. These proportions will be increased in accordance with imminence of attack.
- (iii) Transport not at work will stand by to move from tpt lines into the perimeter (Strong Point D.3) on order of Defence Comd.
- (c) *Action Stations.* (Alarm Signal on whistle). Complete manning of all strong points, less minimum staffs required for functioning as Corps H.Q.:—  
 Central reserve moves into posn.  
 Extra amn issued.  
 Small A/Q Staff moves to Information Room.

### *Method in General*

6. (a) The defence will be based on the formation of a Keep (Sector 'A') closely defended by the Def Coy and by its normal occupants. The remainder of the Corps H.Q. area will be divided into sectors as in the sketch at Appx 'A'.<sup>1</sup> Each of these sectors will establish one or more strong points. These strong points will be as compact as possible, compatible with covering fire tasks laid down in Appx 'B'.<sup>2</sup> Each Strong Point and Post will have a Comd and 2nd in Comd detailed by name.

(b) The Keep and strong points will be defended to the last. Any enemy penetration between strong points will be dealt with by the central reserve normally located within the Keep.

(c) *By Day.* Each Sector comd will organise patrols which will move in their own sectors only.

*By Night.* There will be no patrols inside the Corps H.Q. area. All movement inside the area will be reduced to a minimum and anyone moving will be treated as suspect.

(d) Certain additional posts will be required at night. These will be found from personnel used for patrolling inside the sectors by day. These posts may be placed as ambushes on the approaches which cannot be covered by fire from the strong points.

(e) Patrolling outside the Corps H.Q. area or any counter-attack action required will be undertaken by the central reserve.

(f) Protection of W/T sets is the responsibility of Corps Sigs. On the alarm sounding, personnel of No. 122 W/T Sec will at once occupy their defensive posn in the transmitter camp. Personnel of No. 20 W/T Sec will join personnel of No. 24 W/T Sec in their strong-point.

### *Method in Detail*

7. (a) Boundaries of sectors are given in sketch as Appx 'A'.

(b) Defence Comd:—G.S.O. 1 (Ops), or in his absence G.S.O. 1(I)

Sector Comds:—A. (Keep) G. 2. (CW) or in his absence G. III (SD).

B. Offr to be detailed by DA & QMG.

C. Tpt Offr.

D. Camp Comdt.

E. Senior A.S.C. offr or offr detailed by him.

(c) Personnel allotted to the defence of each sector are those who normally sleep in or near it.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 413.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 414.



(d) Each sector comd will produce a defence scheme and will fwd a copy of it to G(SD) and to comd of each sector which touches his.

### *Strong Points*

8. The strong points to be established in each sector are shown in the sketch at Appx 'A'.

9. The principal fire tasks and approximate number of occupants of each strong point are given in Appx 'B'.

### *Central Reserve*

10. *Comd*—O.C. Def Coy.

*Tps.*—Def Coy, less two pls and all L.M.Gs.

*Area*—'G' Car Park—Church Compound.

*Tasks*—(On order of Def Comd).

- (a) Deal with any enemy infiltration between strong points. This will be effected by detachment of a fighting patrol in the case of a minor infiltration, or by counter-attack in the case of major infiltration.
- (b) Counter-attack outside the area (e.g. to clear the enemy from jungle west or S.W. of Sector E).
- (c) Man prepared defensive posns for close defence of Keep between strong points A.2, A.3 and E.1.

### *Supplies*

11. (a) *Food and Water.* One day's supply of food and, where there is no water point, water will be kept within each strong point.

These will be placed there during the precautionary period.

Arrangements will be made by Camp Comdt for a further two days' supply to be held in the Keep area.

(b) *Medical equipment.* Each strong point will hold a small reserve of dressings, etc., in addition to first field dressing carried on the man.

### *Weapons*

12. All ranks will carry their personal weapons and amn at all times. On the alarm sounding, magazines will be charged until the "all clear" is given. By night all bayonets will be fixed.

### *Scale of Amn.*

13. 50 rds per rifle, 12 rds per pistol, 5 loaded mags per tommy gun, will be carried. On manning posns, an additional 50 rds per rifle will be issued to each man.

Reserves of amn will be held in sectors:—

Rifle: 3000 rds .303 charger packed.

Pistol: 300 rds.

Thompson: 200 rds per gun.

L.M.G: 2000 rds per gun.

All posts will be supplied with grenades, Verrey pistols and lights. A high proportion of 2" mortar illuminating bombs will be carried.

### *Civilians*

14. (a) A F.S. cage for suspects and prisoners of war will be established in the Def Coy area by G(1b).

Guard:—F.S. personnel as available.

(b) A refugee area will be established by G(1b) at 'H' Mess.

Guard:



*Pro personnel.*

(c) Pro will establish a strong post at cross rds at N.W. edge of IMPHAL, with the object of diverting refugees away from the Corps H.Q. area. This will be done by force of arms if necessary, it being the custom of the Japs to disguise themselves as civilians or even to cover the adv by civilians.

15. Action by patrols on finding civilians or unknown military or R.A.F. personnel in their areas:—

- (a) Check identity.
- (b) If a refugee known personally to a responsible member of the patrol, direct to the refugee area.
- (c) If unknown, or in any way suspicious or a P.W. despatch under escort to the F.S. Cage, either direct or through Sector H.Q. whichever is nearer, for disposal by F.S. staff.

*Medical*

16. R.A.P. Church Compound.

Stretcher bearer parties will be organised in each sector as necessary and stretchers placed there during the precautionary period.

*Destruction parties*

17. (a) All important secret documents which are contained in offices outside a strong point, will be moved within a strong point during the precautionary period.

(b) Orders for destruction of documents in an emergency area contained in Appx 'C'.<sup>1</sup> In the Keep area, the decision to destroy documents will rest with the senior offr present. Other sector comds will destroy documents, or give orders for the destruction of documents, on their own responsibility.

(c) W/T sets will NOT be destroyed until ordered by the senior offr of the Keep. They will be destroyed if threatened by capture.

*Inter-comm.*

18. By telephone, R/T or runner. Reports to Defence Comd at 'G' office (telephone ext. 16).

*Alarm*

19. Any person may give the alarm, which will be broadcast by whistle "alarm signal" (a series of alternate long and short blasts). On the alarm sounding, all ranks will go at once to their night alarm posts in any dress. Arms, amn, steel helmets, water bottles, will be carried.

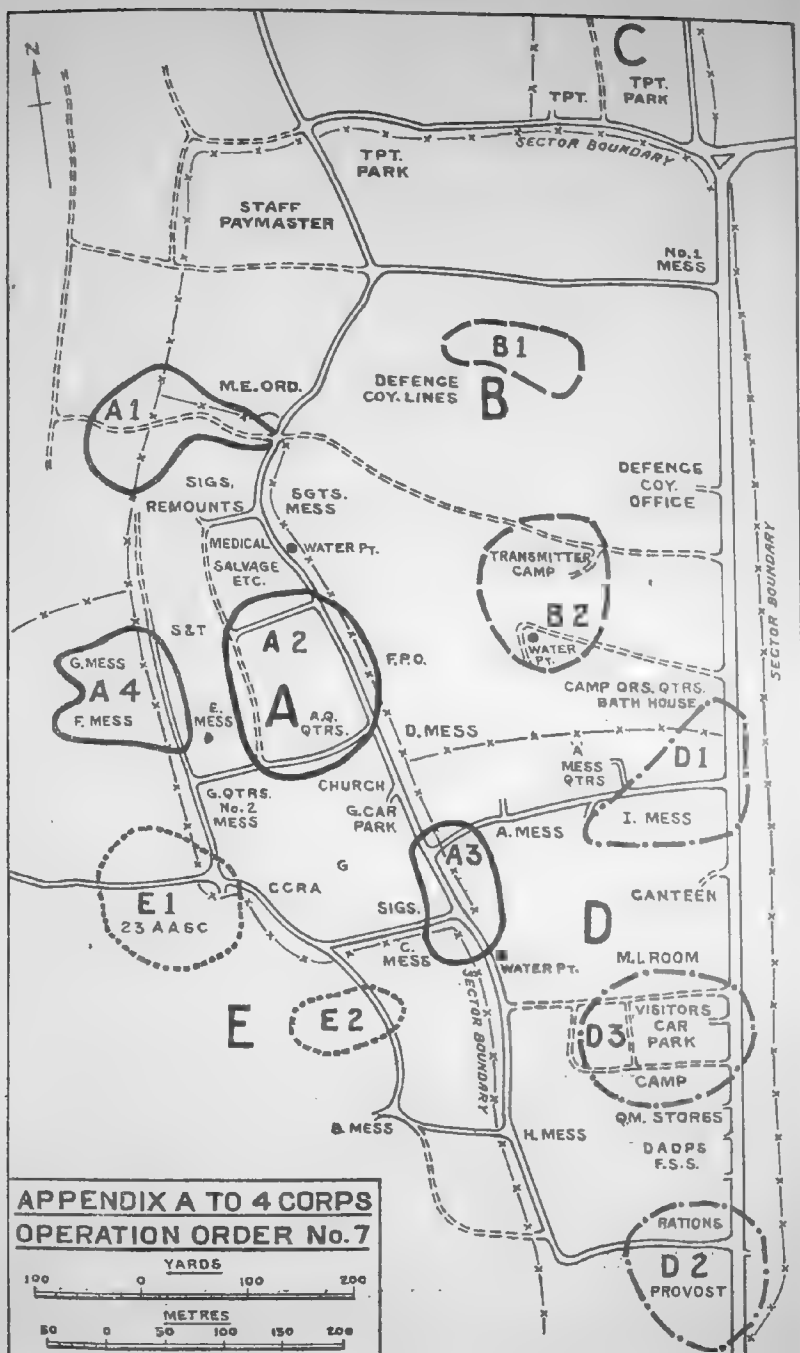
20. Should the alarm coincide with the air raid warning, the above orders will take precedence over P.A.D. orders, until instructions are issued to the contrary by the Def Comd.

21. ACK.

Sd/-  
B.G.S.,  
4 Corps.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 415.







APPENDIX 'B' To 4 CORPS OPERATION ORDER No. 7

*Principal Fire Tasks of Sector Strong Points*

(and approx number of occupants)

*Strong Point A1.* One Pl Defence Coy, Sigs 19 W/T Sec. (50)

- (a) approaches from, N, NW and West.
- (b) road running east of Ord and M.E.

*Strong Point A2.* A/Q Clerks. (25)

Staff E Mess.

close all-round defence A/Q Offices.

*Strong Point A3.* G clerks. One LMG det Defence Coy (30)  
mess staff C Mess.

- (a) road running north towards A/Q offices.
- (b) road running east towards A Mess.
- (c) road running south towards H Mess.

*Strong Point A4.* One Pl Defence Coy. Mess Staff G & F  
messes (45)

- (a) stop enemy crossing road running north and south through their area.
- (b) ambushes area approaches west of G & F Messes (mess staffs).

*Strong Point B1.* 7 oftrs and 40 ORs misc employ.

- (a) ambush X roads NW of Defence Coy lines.
- (b) stop any enemy infiltration through Defence Coy lines from north.

*Strong Point B2.* 122 W/T Sec and others 4 Corps Sigs (45)  
Staff D Mess.

- (a) all round defence Transmitter Camp.
- (b) two roads from east.

*Strong Point D1.* RA & RE Staff. A Mess staff, misc  
employ (45)

- (a) stop enemy crossing Red Road between ORs Camp and Canteen.
- (b) defence of planning room and its destruction, if necessary.

*Strong Point D2.* Provost and misc employ (25)  
Mess Staff H mess.

- (a) prevent attack down IN road to Corps H.Q.
- (b) fire along Red Road to North.

*Strong Point E1.* AASC personnel (70)  
approaches from West, SW and south.

*Strong Point E2.* Sigs 20 and 84 W/T Secs (35)  
Mess Staff B Mess.  
road running from B Mess.

2. *TRANSPORT.*

- (a) Transport will be moved during the Precautionary Period (on



orders Defence Comd) to Strong Point D3-area Visitors Car Park with det in Strong Point D1.

Tasks of Strong Point D3 are as follows:—

- (a) stop enemy crossing road between Canteen and Camp Q.M. stores.
- (b) stop any enemy infiltration from south between (excl) H mess to Visitors' Car Park.
- (b) Alternative positions will, however, be dug in Section C in case (a) cannot be effected. These will provide for all-round defence of the Transport Park.

#### APPENDIX 'C' To 4 CORPS OPERATION ORDER No. 7

##### *Orders for Sector Comds on destruction of documents, etc. in emergency*

1. The order to destroy documents in an emergency will be given by the senior officer present in each sector. Once this order has been given, it is the responsibility of the senior officer present in each branch to organise the destruction of documents within his branch; the signal office and cipher office will count as separate branches for this purpose.

2. The objective to be aimed at when destroying documents in an emergency is that NO DOCUMENTS WHATSOEVER—either official or private—fall into the hands of the enemy. If sufficient time is not available to permit all documents to be destroyed, the order of destruction will be:—

- (a) Future plans and intentions, and the contents of secret boxes.
- (b) Information about own troops, such as orders of battle and location statements.
- (c) Secret publications and files.
- (d) Information about the enemy.
- (e) Non-secret publications and files.
- (f) Private documents.

3. In order to ensure rapid destruction of documents, the following will be maintained in offices at all times:—

- (a) A bottle of petrol in every office in which official documents are normally kept.
- (b) Two grenades incendiary 1¼ lbs (when available) in every office in which official documents are normally kept.
- (c) Three hammers, one each to be kept in the signal office, the telephone exchange and the cipher office, for the destruction of signal, cipher and telephone exchange equipment.

It is the responsibility of each branch security officer that these preparations are made within his branch and that the necessary equipment is always immediately available.



## APPENDIX 4

### ORDER OF BATTLE, KOHIMA GARRISON ON 4 APRIL 1944

#### *ARTY.*

One 25 pdr gun with crew from 24 Reinforcement Camp.

#### *ENGINRS.*

CRE 112 and staff.

GE KOHIMA and staff.

#### *INF.*

1 ASSAM REGT.

One Coy 3/2 PUNJAB. About 140 of all ranks.

One Coy 1 Garrison Bn BURMA REGT.

One Coy 5 BURMA REGT.

Two Pls 27/5 MAHRATTA L.I.

3 ASSAM RIFLES (less dets).

Dets 'V' Force.

SHERE REGT, Nepalese Contingent.

#### *SIGS.*

221 Line Constr. Sec (less det).

Det BURMA P & T Sigs.

Det 4 Corps 'R' Sigs.

Det 'T' L of C Sigs.

#### *MED.*

80 Lt. Fd. Amb. From 50 Bde.

Det 53 I.G.H.

19 Fd Hyg Sec.

#### *RIASC.*

46 GPT Coy (less two secs).

36 Cattle Conducting Sec.

87 Ind Fd Bakery Sec.

622 Ind Supply Sec.

#### *LAB.*

1432 Coy IPC (less det).

#### *MISC.*

24 Reinforcement Camp.

Adm Comd KOHIMA and staff.



## APPENDIX 5

### SPECIAL ORDER OF THE DAY BY COMMANDER KOHIMA GARRISON, DATED 13 APRIL 1944

1. I wish to acknowledge with pride the magnificent effort which has been made by all Officers, NCOs, men and followers of this Garrison in the successful defence of KOHIMA.

2. By your efforts you have prevented the Japanese from attaining his object. All his attempts to overrun the Garrison have been frustrated by your determination and devotion to duty. Your efforts have been in accordance with the highest traditions of British Arms.

3. It seems clear that the enemy has been forced to draw off to meet the threat of the oncoming relief force and this in itself has provided us with a measure of relief. His action now is directed to containing us by harassing fire, what time he seeks to occupy odd posts under cover of that fire.

4. The relief force is on its way and all that is necessary now is for the Garrison to stand firm, hold its fire and beat off any attempt the enemy may make to infiltrate among us.

5. By your acts you have shown what you can do. Stand firm, and deny him every inch of the ground.

6. I deplore the sufferings of the wounded; every effort is being made to alleviate them at the first opportunity.

7. Put your trust in God and continue to hit the enemy hard wherever he may show himself. If you do that, his defeat is sure.

8. I congratulate you on your magnificent effort and am confident that it will be sustained.

Sd/- Colonel H. U. RICHARDS.



## APPENDIX 6

### APPRECIATION OF THE SITUATION BY G.O.C. IV CORPS ON 30 APRIL 1944

#### *Object*

1. To destroy the enemy forces round IMPHAL.  
FACTORS AFFECTING THE ATTAINMENT OF THE OBJECT

#### *Enemy Strength and Dispositions*

2. The main force of the enemy infantry in the form of 15 and 31 Divs is operating in the area NORTH of IMPHAL. 15 Div is dispersed on a wide front from approx UKHRUL to KANGPOKPI with one bn in the KABAW Valley area. 31 Div is more concentrated round KOHIMA. There are indications that plans are on foot to send 124 Regt and one bn of 138 Regt together with a mtn bty to help 15 Div. The two latter units may have arrived on 4 Corps front.

33 Div less 2½ bns is concentrated in the BISHENPUR area. The remaining 2¼ bns together with one bn of 15 Div are operating against the TAMU—PALEL line.

3. In their operations up to date in 4 Corps area the enemy has suffered heavy casualties, which, at a conservative estimate amount to 5,000 killed. Information from prisoners indicates that no reinforcements have arrived. Enemy divisions are, therefore, weak. Nevertheless there is no sign that his determination to secure the objectives which he has set out to capture has weakened in any way, and he appears to be prepared to face any number of casualties to achieve his end. It remains to be seen how long he can stand this process of attrition.

#### *Enemy Object*

4. The initial enemy plans on all fronts have been frustrated. As far as can be ascertained from captured documents his object now is to capture KOHIMA and then to capture IMPHAL. The latter operation to be carried out by an attack from the north combined with one from the south and west by 33 Div. To achieve his object he is attempting to clear up the situation at KOHIMA while adopting an offensive—defensive with 15 Div. The latter div has suffered heavy casualties and there are indications that it is not in very good condition. Meanwhile, strenuous efforts are being made by 33 Div, both on the BISHENPUR and SHENAM fronts, to blast a way through into the IMPHAL plain by the use of artillery and tanks. These are the only routes on which tanks and any appreciable concentration of artillery can be maintained.

5. It is clear, therefore, that we should concentrate against the weakest link in the chain in the form of 15 Div and endeavour to knock that out before reinforcements can arrive. The wide dispersion of this div invites defeat in detail but its very dispersion in mountainous and jungle-covered country makes the process slow and involves the use of a large number of troops. Meanwhile, the threat by 33 Div cannot be ignored and the longer it is left the stronger will the build-up become.



*Own Dispositions*

6. In the north, 23 Ind Div is operating on the IMPHAL—UKHRUL axis. It is holding a secure base in the area KAMENG RK 4970 and the hill features to the north and south, also the hill feature of NUNGSHIGUM RK 4376. This requires one bde and the GURKHA Parachute Bn. The remaining two bdes are operating as far east as SOKPAO RK 7185 and as far north as SIRAKUKHONG RK 6796. One bde is entirely mobile and the other forms a roadhead and gives depth to the former. The object of both is to search out and kill any enemy in the area which extends as far west as excl IRIL Valley.

7. 5 Ind Div (less one bde) is operating to clear the ridge MAPAO RK 3579—MOLVUM RK 3785 and to gain possession of Pt 5417 RK 3894. After gaining possession of this high ground, the enemy to the west in the vicinity of the main road will be destroyed and the Div will move on to the axis of the main road. 63 Ind Inf Bde (17 Ind Lt Div) are now holding a secure base in the SENGMAI RK 2879 area and will be relieved of this commitment as soon as 89 Ind Inf Bde arrives.

8. 32 Ind Inf Bde, with one bn 63 Ind Inf Bde and 17 Ind Lt Div Def Bn, are holding the BISHENPUR area. Their object is to prevent any further advance by 33 Div from this area and to kill enemy by means of local operations.

9. 20 Ind Div (less 32 Ind Inf Bde) is blocking the TAMU-PALEL Rd in the SHENAM area, and is holding the approach via SHUGANU.

10. 48 Ind Inf Bde is in Corps reserve.

Tanks are distributed to the Divs in accordance with the task in hand.

11. The southern front is, therefore, defensive, while the northern front is offensive, but, for the reasons given in para 5, an early offensive against 33 Div in the BISHENPUR area is essential. This will take place as soon as possible after the relief of 63 Ind Inf Bde by 89 Ind Inf Bde.

*Areas in the IMPHAL Plain which it is vital to defend adequately*

12. The two main areas are the IMPHAL KEEP and the PALEL BOX, but as these are 25 miles apart it is necessary to hold subsidiary areas between them.

*(a) The IMPHAL KEEP*

This includes an all-weather airfield as well as the main stocks of food and ammunition. In addition, the bulk of the Hospitals, Workshops, Ordnance Depots and HQs of formations are located in this KEEP. The area enclosed is large and dispersion against bombing has had to give way to provision against the greater threat of ground attack.

*(b) The PALEL BOX*

This also includes an all-weather air-strip and the balance of the installations not included in the KEEP.

Unless these two areas are held securely the success of operations outside the IMPHAL Plain will be jeopardised. Both areas are overlooked by hills and both are very extensive. They, therefore, require a large number of troops to hold them. The argument that forces operating outside these areas automatically protect them is more theoretical than practical in this type of warfare. A small force of JIFS or JAPS, if they got into these areas at night, might blow up quantities of



ammunition or burn supplies, thereby seriously curtailing operations and embarrassing the air maintenance situation. Armed men of a sufficiently high standard of training to hold these areas must, therefore, be provided.

#### *Time.*

13. It may be taken for purposes of planning that 21 May at latest the monsoon will have started, not necessarily strongly. The speed of operations will be curtailed as soon as the monsoon breaks. It is, therefore, imperative that the maximum use should be made of the next three weeks to obtain decisive results against the enemy. This is rendered the more important in view of the decision to withdraw 3 Ind Div and the consequent possibility that enemy reinforcements may be sent to this front and by the limitations imposed by monsoon conditions on air supply and air support.

#### *Administration*

14. At Appendix 'A' is a paper which shows that with the present air maintenance resources the reserves in 4 Corps area will be reduced to 15 days for the present force by 15 June. The deduction is that by that date the road to DIMAPUR must be opened and be kept open or a drastic reduction of troops in the IMPHAL area must take place. The latter is not possible unless the enemy has been decisively defeated, so that in any case the DIMAPUR road must be opened.

#### *Monsoon*

15. The effect of the monsoon will be to curtail the pace of operations both on land and in the air but it will not stop them. The incidence of malaria will increase heavily, and difficulties of maintenance will force operations onto the axis of all-weather roads.

In view of their communications the enemy difficulties in all areas except the TAMU road will be greater than ours. While he is not likely to suffer from any shortage of food, he will still have to get ammunition forward and this will present a most difficult problem by all routes except the one via TAMU.

### COURSES OPEN TO OURSELVES

#### *Course 1.*

16. To continue to adopt a defensive attitude in the south and to push on in the north with 23 Ind Div directed on UKHRUL and 5 Ind Div directed on KANGPOKPI and northwards.

#### *Advantages*

- (a) Will cut the 15 Div L of C as soon as we enter UKHRUL.
- (b) Will start to open our own L of C to DIMAPUR.
- (c) Will help indirectly the advance of 2 Div from KOHIMA.

#### *Disadvantages*

- (d) Slow, owing to the necessity for clearing up the country to the south of the line UKHRUL—KANGPOKPI.
- (e) Unlikely to inflict any decisive defeat on the enemy owing to his dispersion in small groups and the ease with which he can withdraw in this type of country.
- (f) Maintenance will be difficult in hill areas.
- (g) The advance must be divergent.



- (h) It assumes that no offensive from the south will develop.
- (e) It does not make full use of all available forces in the limited time at our disposal before the monsoon.

### *Course II*

17. As for Course I but combined with an attack by 17 Ind Lt Div against the forces of 33 Div in the BISHENPUR area.

#### *Advantages*

- (a) If successful, will remove one of the threats to the IMPHAL Plain from the south and may score a decisive success.
- (b) As a result of (a) will free troops for rest and operations elsewhere.
- (c) Will open the BISHENPUR track.
- (d) Will have definite repercussions on the enemy on 20 Div front.
- (e) Will enable operations to open the main L of C to continue.

#### *Disadvantages*

- (f) The Corps Reserve will be very low while the attack in the BISHENPUR area is taking place.
- (g) The attack cannot be put into operation quickly nor can it be carried through quickly owing to the nature of the country.

### *Course III*

18. To concentrate all efforts on an advance by the main road towards KOHIMA and to adopt the defensive elsewhere.

This course will not achieve the object of destroying the enemy forces, takes little account of their possible action and is what the enemy hopes we shall do. It need not, therefore, be considered further.

#### CONCLUSION

19. Course II should be followed. It is obvious that the main road to KOHIMA has got to be cleared sometime and the sooner the better. It is equally obvious that not more than one div can be used on this axis and that it is the most suitable axis on which to operate during the monsoon. Before the monsoon breaks we should take every opportunity to kill as many enemy as possible. This can best be accomplished by operating on the UKHRUL axis which will help operations north along the main road and by making a determined effort to exterminate the remaining forces of 33 Div in the BISHENPUR area.

#### COURSES OPEN TO THE ENEMY

20. If he is to attain his object he must capture KOHIMA and then IMPHAL. This can only be achieved by attacking each place, preferably simultaneously so as to disperse our air effort. As far as the attack on IMPHAL is concerned it is likely to come from the north and south simultaneously.

21. If circumstances force him to abandon the attack against KOHIMA or IMPHAL or both, then his most likely line of action is to remain in the hills and to harry our communications to the north with the object of forcing us to retain large forces in the area against the time when he can receive reinforcements to enable him to resume the offensive.

#### SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

- 22. (a) The enemy is likely to continue his operations for the capture



of IMPHAL by attacks from the North and South. 15 Div on the North appears somewhat dislocated at present and may not put in any determined attack until it has been reinforced from 31 Div. It seems likely that pressure from 33 Div will not be relaxed. (paras 2—5).

(b) Operations North of IMPHAL are bound to be slow owing to the nature of the country and the dispersed layout of 15 Div. They must be pursued in order to prevent 15 Div from reorganizing. At the same time the threat by 33 Div at BISHENPUR must be dealt with as early as possible. (paras 5 & 11).

(c) The IMPHAL Keep and the PALEL Box must be held securely as they constitute the base for all operations both by land and air in the area. Troops must be provided for this purpose. (para 12).

(d) The maximum offensive effort must be carried out during the next three weeks. (para 13).

(e) The latest date by which the DIMAPUR Rd must be opened and kept open is 15 June. (para 14 and Appx A).

(f) The monsoon will force us onto an all-weather axis for operations by a force of any size. This can only be the DIMAPUR Rd. Japanese difficulties will be greater than ours in the monsoon. (para 15).

(g) Our operations to the North must continue and we must take the offensive on the BISHENPUR front as soon as troops can be made available. (para 19).

#### POLICY FOR THE FUTURE CONDUCT OF OPERATIONS

23. The present offensive operations to the North by 23 and 5 Ind Divs must continue. The object of these is to clear the country South of a line from UKHRUL to KANGPOKPI. It may not be possible to maintain 23 Ind Div as far North as UKHRUL in the monsoon. In this event it will have to be withdrawn as far back as maintenance is possible. The need for making full use of fine weather to clear the country of enemy as far West as the IRIL Valley (excl) is clear.

24. 5 Ind Div, having cleared the area within their boundaries up to KANGPOKPI incl, will be prepared to continue the move northwards as circumstances dictate.

25. 17 Ind Lt Div, with 32 Ind Inf Bde under comd will, as soon as 63 Ind Inf Bde can be relieved by 89 Ind Inf Bde, take the offensive against 33 Div in the BISHENPUR area with the object of exterminating 33 Div.

26. 20 Ind Div will continue to hold its present front.

27. A Corps reserve of two bns will be formed as soon as 17 Ind Lt Div start operations. The composition will be notified later.

#### APPENDIX 'A' APPRECIATION BY 'Q' IV CORPS REGARDING THE PRACTICABILITY OF MAINTAINING IV CORPS BY AIR SUPPLY UP TO

31 JULY 44

1. The object of this paper is to examine whether the air transport resources allotted to maintain 4 Corps are adequate and, if not, what reduction in strength of the Corps or in the scope of operations may be entailed owing to inadequate air-lift.



2. In writing this paper, the following basic factors have been taken into consideration:—

(a) *Basic Strengths*

B.T.	30,000	} after allowing for intake of 89 Bde.
I.T.	125,000	
Animals	11,000	

(b) *Basic Supply Demand*

B.T.	120,000 lbs per day @ 4	lbs per day.
I.T.	375,000 lbs per day @ 3	lbs per day.
Animals	82,500 lbs per day @ 7½	lbs per day.
<hr/>		
577,500 lbs		
<hr/>		

(c) *Basic M.T. Spirit*

Based on two divisions operating "all out" at any one time and assuming that the present rigid control on the use of petrol will continue; that shingling and maintenance of air fields at the present rate continue, it is estimated that 22,000 gals M.T. Spirit will be consumed daily, i.e., 88 tons=197,120 lbs  
say 200,000 lbs.

(d) *Basic Amn Demand*

Based on actuals it is estimated that amn daily expenditure will not exceed 50 tons per day  
say 112,000 lbs.

(d) *Basic Ord Store Demand*

D.D.O.S. estimates a daily demand of 40 tons  
say 89,600 lbs.

(f) *Miscellaneous—Canteen—Postal—R.E. Material, etc.*

Based on 5% of the above total demand=48,950 lbs, or  
say 49,000 lbs.

Total daily weight required for one day for strengths in para 2(a) is:  
1,028,000 lbs, or, @ 7,000 lbs per sortie, 147 sorties, or 441 tons per day.

3. To the basic figure of 147 sorties per day calculated in para 2 above must be added

250 reinforcements per day @ 25 per sortie=10 sorties  
Giving a grand total for 4 Corps (and excluding R.A.F. lift of 60 tons per day) of  
157 sorties=471 tons per day.

4. Further considerations affecting the fly-in are set out below:—

(a) That the fine weather period will last up to 21 May.

(b) That from the time bad weather starts, an *average* daily maximum of not more than 70 sorties a day can be expected.  
This should be improved from the time that hard standings



are completed, when each strip should be capable of dealing with 15 aircraft per hour. The limiting factors will thus be the number of hours per month during which aircraft can be received. This has been estimated at 4 hours per day or alternatively at 10 days per month. On paper, the number of hours is the same, but in practice the difference is immense. Only the R.A.F. can give the true answer.

- (c) That aircraft will lift 7,000 lbs per sortie, of which 1,000 lbs will be free dropped. This, however, is not borne out by our experience at present. The average weight lifted is only 4,500 lbs instead of 6,000 lbs. Considerable losses must be anticipated in the supplies which are free dropped, particularly during the monsoon.
- (d) That no losses of stores or supplies occur due to enemy action or weather.
- (e) That R.A.F. maintenance is accepted at the flat figure of 60 tons per day during the whole period up to 31 Jul 44.
- (f) That reserves in 4 Corps will be reduced to 15 days by 15 Jun.
- (g) That during the fine weather period to 21 May, Eastern Air Command will deliver approx 433 tons per day from 5 May onwards.
- (h) That during the malarial season reinforcements at the rate of 250 men per day will be adequate.
- (i) That the present fly-in of 3,200 tons of stores which was to have been completed by 30 April will not now be completed until 4 May, from which date daily maintenance by air will start.

5. Based on para 4 above, and assuming that fly-in as given in para 4(g) starts from 5 May, the total tonnage which can be flown in for both R.A.F. and Army is:—

- (a) May 5-21 @ 433 tons per day = 7,361 tons.
- May 22-31 @ 210 tons per day = 2,100 tons.
- June 1-30 @ 210 tons per day = 6,300 tons.
- July 1-31 @ 210 tons per day = 6,510 tons.

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22,271 tons.

less 92 sorties of reinforcements, say 276 tons or a  
 Nett total of 21,995 tons.

- (b) Tonnage required by R.A.F. and Army for the period and converting the 10 reinforcement sorties @ 3 tons per sortie is:—
  - May 1-31 @ 214\* plus 60 = 274 tons per day or 8,494 tons.
  - June 1-15 @ 236 plus 60 = 296 " " " " 4,440 "
  - June 16-30 @ 471 plus 60 = 531 " " " " 7,965 "
  - July 1-31 @ 471 plus 60 = 531 " " " " 16,461 "
- 
- 37,360 tons.

\* This low figure for May is due to the fact that by 4 May we shall have rations up to 31 May on the special reduced scale.



Or, to summarise:

Against a total tonnage demand of 37,360 tons up to 31 Jul, it will only be possible to fly in 21,995 tons, i.e. a deficiency of 15,365 tons.

6. The following deductions are made from the above figures:—

- (a) That the average daily tonnage for Army and R.A.F. which can be flown in over the period 4 May to 31 Jul is 250 tons per day, or rather less than half the total demand for R.A.F. and Army at the present strengths.
- (b) That as the capacity of the airfields during the monsoon period is the limiting factor and as
  - (i) It is not possible to increase the rate of fly-in before the monsoon, or
  - (ii) In the time available and with the resources available it is not possible to increase the intake capacity of all weather strips except as stated in para 4(b) above, the corollary is, either to open the road and keep open the road to MANIPUR Road so as to get the balance of maintenance in by Road L of C, or if this is not possible by 15 June when resources will be eaten down, then about two divisions and a proportion of Corps Troops must be flown out of the area.

7. The crux of the whole problem turns on paras 4(a) and (b). Any extension of the fine-weather period will ease the problem as would any increase in the number of aircraft which can be received in a day during the monsoon.

The figure of 70 aircraft per day quoted in para 4(b) is taken from para 3 of 4 Corps letter 240 G dated 25 Apr 44 addressed to Fourteenth Army.

Intake can possibly be increased by night flying, but it is doubtful whether this is a practicable proposition in the monsoon.

8. The situation disclosed by this examination is such that it is recommended that an immediate conference on a high level should be held to:—

- (a) Examine the figures set out in this paper and confirm their correctness or otherwise.
- (b) Examine the possibility of increasing intake in the IMPHAL Valley during the monsoon, with special reference to night flying.
- (c) Consider the advisability of reducing the scale of rations shown in para 2(b) by say  $\frac{1}{2}$  lb per man from 1 June onwards. This would give a saving of 78,000 lbs per day or 11 sorties (33 tons) a day, and, if accepted, would give some extension to the date by which the road to MANIPUR Road should be opened.
- (d) Examine what action is to be taken if the figures in this paper are accepted and if it is unsafe to plan on the IMPHAL—MANIPUR road being opened by 15 June at the latest.
- (e) The capacity of the B & A Railway to maintain the troops in 4 Corps area, 33 Corps, 202 Area, the lift to CHINA, an enlarged airfield construction programme, is not dealt with in this paper, but undoubtedly requires examination. It is understood that a certain amount of air supply to 4 Corps area is visualised by Fourteenth Army as a permanent commitment.



## APPENDIX 7

### SPECIAL ORDER BY MAJ. GEN. TANAKA NOBUO 2 JUNE 1944

Now is the time to capture IMPHAL. Our death-defying Inf Group expects certain victory when it penetrates the main fortress of the enemy. The coming battle is a turning point. It will decide the success or failure of the Greater East Asia war. You men have got to be fully in the picture as to what the present position is; regarding death as something lighter than a feather you must tackle the job of definitely capturing IMPHAL.

That's why it must be expected that the Div will be almost annihilated. I have confidence in your courage and devotion and believe that you will do your duty. But should any delinquencies occur you have got to understand that I shall take the necessary action.

In the front line rewards and punishments must be given on the spot, without delay. A man, for instance, who puts up a good show should have his name sent in at once. On the other hand a man guilty of any misconduct should be punished at once in accordance with the Military Code. Further, in order to keep the honour of his unit bright a Comd may have to use his sword as a weapon of punishment—exceedingly shameful though it is to have to shed the blood of one's own soldiers on the battlefield.

Fresh troops with unused rifles have now arrived, and the time is at hand—the arrow is ready to leave the bow.

The Inf Group is in high spirits, afire with valour and dominated by one thought and one thought only—the duty laid upon them to annihilate the enemy.

ON THIS ONE BATTLE RESTS THE FATE OF THE EMPIRE.  
All Officers and men, fight courageously.

Tanaka Nobuo  
Comd. 33 Div Inf Gp.



## APPENDIX 8

### THE STRONGHOLD

(Special Force Operations)

"Turn ye to the Stronghold, ye prisoners of hope"

#### OBJECT OF THE STRONGHOLD

The Stronghold is a *machān* overlooking a kid tied up to entice the Japanese tiger.

The Stronghold is an asylum for Long Range Penetration Group wounded.

The Stronghold is a magazine of stores.

The Stronghold is a defended air-strip.

The Stronghold is an administrative centre for loyal inhabitants.

The Stronghold is an orbit round which columns of the Brigade circulate. It is suitably placed with reference to the main objective of the Brigade.

The Stronghold is a base for light planes operating with columns on the main objective.

The Stronghold is designed to fulfil a definite function in the employment of Long Range Penetration Groups; a function which has hitherto been neglected. In all our recent contacts with the Japanese it has been apparent that any dug-in defended position sited in remote areas where it is almost possible to assemble a concentration of artillery and extremely difficult to make accurate reconnaissance without heavy losses is capable of a most obstinate and prolonged defence against greatly superior forces. In fact, no single, large and well constructed position has as yet been taken by assault. Yet none of the Japanese positions we know of possesses the advantages it is proposed to give the Stronghold. They are all accessible to wheeled transport although in some cases artillery can only be brought up to attack them with great difficulty.

From this I draw the inference, firstly, that it is foolish to direct attacks against defended enemy positions if by any means he can be met in the open, and, secondly, that we should induce him to attack us in our defended positions. It is obvious that columns of Long Range Penetration have an unrivalled chance of meeting him in the open and that, therefore, they should even more rarely need to attack him in his positions. In fact, it may truly be said that they should do so only when the position concerned has already been isolated by the action of columns for a considerable time, or there is other reason to suppose that the position will put up a weak resistance.

We wish, therefore, firstly to encounter the enemy in the open and preferably in ambushes laid by us, and secondly to induce him to attack us only in our defended Strongholds.

Further to make sure of our advantage, and in view of the fact that the enemy will be in superior force in our neighbourhood we shall choose for our Strongholds, areas inaccessible to wheeled transport.

For convenience sake such Strongholds should clearly be used to cover (but not to include) an air-strip. The ideal situation for a



Stronghold is the centre of a circle of thirty miles radius consisting of closely wooded and very broken country, only passable to pack transport owing to great natural obstacles, and capable only of slow improvement. This centre should ideally consist of a level upland with a cleared strip for Dakotas, a separate supply dropping area, taxi-ways to the Stronghold, a neighbouring friendly village or two, and an inexhaustible and uncontaminatable water supply within the Stronghold. Such an area can then be organised in the manner indicated in the accompanying sketch.

The motto of the Stronghold is NO SURRENDER.

The question of how the garrison should be equipped, how organised, what additional measures are required, such as making dummy strongholds, dummy guns, organizing artillery Out Posts, laying mine-fields, constructing Keeps and stores either in the Stronghold or in hiding places outside, and many others are all matters for study. They will not be fully dealt with here, both for lack of space and lack of study.

### *Light Plane Base and Depot*

In emergency the Stronghold may become the storehouse of the Long Range Penetration Group and for this reason every opportunity will be taken of stocking it with rations and material of war of every description. Owing to its fixed nature Supply Dropping Planes will be thoroughly acquainted with its exact location and will be capable of a heavy drop each bright moonlight night. If all the Supply Dropping planes available are turned on each moonlight night three such visits a month should not only stock for the equivalent of five columns using the Stronghold as base, but a reserve should be built up for the remaining six columns and HQ.

In order to make the stocks as ample as possible, the two floater columns will farm the neighbourhood and employ purchasers of rice and cattle up to a considerable distance from the demesne, in order to subsist as far as possible on local resources. The catching of fish and slaughter of buffalo will not be neglected.

The Stronghold will be regularly used by up to ten planes of the light plane force. Splinter-proof pens must be built for those in the protected bay under lee of the Stronghold. Normally, columns in the field will receive their S.D. direct but in emergency these planes, which will seldom be more than forty miles from the columns in the field, will feed the columns with rations and ammunition. Using the strip with discretion the planes can flit to and fro, doing several round turns apiece on moonlight nights, or perhaps a couple at dawn and dusk on moonless nights. The distances involved are so small that the danger period is reduced to a minimum. On each trip the plane takes 700 lbs of supplies and can evacuate a wounded man or a prisoner. In this way the wounded and prisoners and captured war material will accumulate in the Stronghold, whence they will periodically be evacuated either by light plane from Kabaw Valley or by Dakota, by night.

### *Nature of the Stronghold*

The Stronghold proper is a fortification or earthwork large enough to be occupied by a battalion or two columns, plus two troops of artillery, a stores depot, and an asylum for personnel to the number of two hundred at a time. At the same time it must be small enough to give the necessary compactness in defence. It aims to hold out against all attacks whatsoever and to accomplish this relies upon earthworks and



minefields for immediate defence from the enemy's weapons, with a well co-ordinated and thoroughly tested fire-plan for the employment of its own weapons.

To assist in its local defence one company will invariably be employed outside the Stronghold as a floater. The function of this company is to perambulate the country within a few thousand yards of the Stronghold with the object of getting news of any enemy intrusion and attacking him before he reaches the Stronghold. It will also prevent the enemy digging-in, cut off his supplies and generally harass him. To enable it to exist while the Stronghold is closely invested a certain storage of supplies in hiding places well clear of the Stronghold, (at least one mile away) is advisable.

This floater company, detailed by the day, will also find the local garrison for the Light Machine Gun pits giving immediate local protection to the air-strip.

Owing to the need for compactness it is wrong to attempt to include an air-strip within the Stronghold. The latter must be sited close enough to the strip to afford direct protection to aircraft using it. That means that the strip must be within artillery range of the Stronghold and that a taxi route leads to a harbour immediately under the Stronghold.

Normally the strip is protected by three or four Light Machine-Gun posts whose crews are found from the floater company on duty. It is, of course, further protected both by the Stronghold and by the perambulating floater company. Protection may also be improved by the organization of local inhabitants into an intelligence corps to give early warning of enemy approach from any direction.

These measures ensure that the strip can always be used with confidence of freedom from enemy interference except when a large enemy force has succeeded in reaching the Stronghold and is engaged in attacking it. Owing to the nature of the Stronghold defence it will presently be seen that such force will have no power to remain for longer than a week or so at a time in the region and demesne of the Stronghold.

The use of artillery in the garrison, which will consist of one troop of 25-pounder guns and one troop of half inch Vickers Machine Guns or possibly of a Bofors troop, is indicated in the attached sketch and in the notes thereon. The fact that this artillery must normally be loaded on Dakotas makes it desirable that the Stronghold shall be sited near a Dakota strip. Provided, however, gliders can be put down, this is not essential. It is essential that it be sited to cover a light plane strip.

The location of the Stronghold is a matter of such importance that it has been dealt with in a separate paragraph.

Additional points dealt with in the notes to the sketches are, booby-traps and minefields, S.D. area apart from the strip which might be otherwise employed, water storage, sanitation, storage of warlike stores, weapons and equipment, petrol, life-buoy fuel, and rations.

### *How the Stronghold Works*

When the Stronghold is first introduced and long before its construction is complete a visit by enemy patrols to its neighbourhood may be expected. These patrols are unlikely to be much more than a platoon or company in strength but it will be essential to drive them off without permitting near approach or any attempt to dig-in near the Stronghold. This will call for vigorous activity, firstly on the part of the floater columns who should get the first information of the enemy's approach,



and secondly on the part of the Stronghold floater company which must, therefore, be detailed and capable of functioning correctly from the very first.

It will be undesirable to unmask the artillery in the Stronghold on this first visit of the enemy but this may be done in case of need.

The enemy's reconnaissance planes will meantime have found the strip and will pay it constant attention. For this reason the construction of a dummy strip is necessary. The ideal would be for the strip used for putting down the force to become the dummy and another secretly constructed a few miles away for serious use, with the Stronghold standing guard over it. It will not, however, always be possible to fulfil this ideal.

The enemy, on learning that something is going on in the area and that his light patrols are driven off while his air action against the dummy strip does not appear to have put an end to the activity, will fit out an expedition to reduce the Stronghold. Whatever weapons this force may be provided with they will not be able to reach the Stronghold unless on a pack basis. It will be the business of the nearest floater column to obtain early news of the approach of this force and then to attack it continuously affording it no time to rest. Coolies for road construction can be driven off in the first encounter. Bivouacs will be attacked by night. Suitable points in the tracks will be skilfully ambushed by day.

Unless the floater column has failed to do its work this first enemy column, which is unlikely to be more than a battalion in strength, will be driven back without ever getting near the Stronghold, much less attacking it. Should the column reach the immediate area of the Stronghold the latter's floater company joined to the dummy Strongholds and the artillery plan should completely discomfort it, and the subsequent action of the floater columns, which will have closed in from the rear, will complete the effect.

Thus foiled, the enemy will have to consider whether to launch really powerful attack with a greatly reinforced column or to accept the presence of the Stronghold in his midst and endeavour to render it as innocuous as possible by air attack. His decision will depend upon the general situation.

Let us assume that he decided on a full attack. He will allot a regiment with artillery and light tanks, a coolie contingent to build the road, or roads, and air support.

The Brigade Commander who will have anticipated the possibility will have made arrangements for reinforcing the floater columns to a greater or less extent in accordance with the general situation. If the task he is doing is of vital importance and must not be interrupted he may tell the two floaters and the Stronghold to manage by themselves until he is free to come to their aid. This they should be perfectly capable of doing. But it will normally be possible for him to reinforce them with an addition of another two or more columns. In this way the enemy is met under ideal conditions; making an approach whose route can be foreseen through country with which we are more familiar than he, and compelled to move slowly to cover his road construction. Under these conditions two columns should find little difficulty in cutting up a regiment.

Some of the enemy force may, however, reach the Stronghold area. He is now under the necessity with which we have become so familiar



of pushing costly probing attacks to find out the exact location and extent of the Stronghold and the nature of its defences. It will be well to conceal these as far as possible in the opening stages. Meanwhile the columns will close in from without, completely cutting off whatever force has succeeded in reaching the Stronghold, and preventing it from digging-in in the neighbourhood of the Stronghold. Thus this force should share the fate of the others and dissolve, yielding both prisoners and booty.

The enemy will now consider whether to renew the assault, and if so, how. It will be clear to him that only a sustained assault with powerful air forces, combined with great superiority on the ground, will be likely to succeed. He must therefore project a division or equivalent force into the attack under the same unfavourable conditions. This time the Brigade Commander must devote all his resources to repel the assault. In doing so he should have an excellent chance of success, especially if he has taken the precaution and found opportunity to store supplies in hiding places in the Demesne. (The Demesne may be defined as the area under the aegis of the Stronghold). The enemy will seldom be able to stage such a large-scale operation in the middle of the embarrassments inflicted on him by the operations of columns. If he is able to do so he affords an ideal opportunity for the full use of a Longe Range Penetration Brigade.

#### NOTE TO SKETCH A. ILLUSTRATING ORGANISATION OF A STRONGHOLD LOCALITY

The accompanying sketch is designed to illustrate the principles on which a Stronghold is organised. (See page 436).

The defence is compact and does not attempt more than is well within the compass of the force available.

Thus the actual Stronghold is only five hundred yards in diameter.

The approaches to the Stronghold are guarded by minefields. In the first instance these may be composed of whatever is handy as 3" Mortar bombs, 36 Grenades, etc. In addition it is hoped to supply each Stronghold with a few hundred mines. As time goes on the incessant work of the defenders steadily improves the mined defences until the field becomes impenetrable. The minefield should be used as the route of exit in the presence of the enemy and for this purpose an underground passage passes from the centre of the Stronghold to the edge of the minefield. The exit is covered and concealed. This passage must normally be booby-trapped and blocked.

After the immediate needs of defence have been met the Stronghold turns its attention to the defence of the air-strip. In the first instance this is provided by artillery fire either on tasks as shown or by observation. To assist in directing accurate fire on the approaches to the air-strip and neighbouring forest, artillery O.P.s are previously sited and dug-in and well camouflaged. Line is laid to each O.P. to which a telephone can be attached. The line must be dug-in. On occasion it will be found best to put the O.P. in a tree. If the tree is well picked there is no reason for the observer to be visible from any angle.

It is particularly important to provide for the observation of dummy Strongholds and other places where the enemy may be expected to assemble.

The artillery tasks shown are for 25-pounders. The Bofor is perhaps the best short range close support gun in existence and may be sited



within the Stronghold with a view to engaging enemy targets from 1200 to 2500 yards. In the illustration, for example, a couple of Bofors would afford excellent covering fire to the air-strip. Avenue would have to be cut through trees to permit of this.

Anti-aircraft guns will invariably be placed as near to the edge of the Stronghold as possible and will be sited to fire over the Stronghold, inwards instead of outwards. It will often be possible to place a Bofor in the mined area clear of the Stronghold to give better results in this respect. But these guns cannot be placed outside the defended area immediately around the Stronghold or they will be destroyed piecemeal.

After deciding the immediate question of siting and internal organisation of the Stronghold so that it both possesses the necessary compactness (500 yards diameter normal) and at the same time affords the maximum protection to the strip and its environs in the shape of artillery fire of both sorts and of a safe asylum for aircraft, personnel, and material, it is next necessary to consider the functions of the Floater Company.

### *The Floater Company*

If we look upon the Stronghold perimeter as the kid tied up to attract the enemy tiger, then we find the ambuscaded hunter in the shape of the floater columns, on the grand scale, and the floater company on the minor scale.

The floater columns are a strategical, the floater company, a tactical ambuscade.

Normally the Floater company will count on receiving early news from the floater columns of any enemy approach. But it will at all times be ready for the appearance of the enemy in the immediate neighbourhood of the Stronghold in any degree of force.

The floater company, (all coys adopt this role in rotation), aims at being in a position to deliver an attack on the enemy by surprise with every thing in our favour. It aims at obtaining a most intimate knowledge of every square yard of ground within a radius of four miles of the Stronghold. It knows the position of the dummy Strongholds, the artillery tasks, the mined and booby-trapped areas, the existing approaches, and the approaches a skilful enemy will use when he thinks fit to leave the tracks. It will have studied the enemy's problem with special reference to the Bivouac areas he is most likely to select on first arrival. Such area might well be an artillery task to be fired on demand only. Above all the floater company will have learned to "cast wide" that is to say to cover the company right round the clock as thoroughly as possible. The company must keep incessantly on the move.

An addition to these tasks is that of providing the immediate local defence of the air-strip. This is done by manning all or some of the light machine-gun posts dug in the positions shown on the sketch for the close defence of the strip. Normally four would be sufficient, each manned by two men, one with a Bren, the other with discharger cup. When time allows, these Light Machine-Gun pits may be roofed in with timber and turfed over; always provided that their primary purpose of a good field of fire has been secured.

As always with the Stronghold organisation the garrison of the Light Machine-Gun pits will remain at their posts to the last. If they evacuate without orders they will be refused admission to the Stronghold.

The floater company will therefore carry always five days' rations and



the 10 rations carried by the two men will constitute the larder of the Light Machine-Gun pits.

A store of water will be kept in each pit.

The object of garrisoning the pits is to guard the strip from rapid overrunning by the enemy before any aircraft that may be in the safe bay at the time have been able to take off.

The arrival of the enemy will normally be first heralded by the floater company by W/T signal to the Stronghold. The latter immediately warns all pilots in the Stronghold. Enemy aircraft activity in support may well make evacuation of aircraft inadvisable. The Stronghold Commander would normally count on getting fairly full and accurate information as to the strength and intention of the enemy column from the floater columns, which, throughout, maintain close relations with the inhabitants. Thus he can make a good guess as to whether it is a serious attempt to carry the Stronghold by assault (in which case enemy air support is probable if not certain) or whether it is the normal patrol, out to gain information. In neither case is it necessarily the best thing to evacuate the aircraft in the asylum. If there are no enemy aircraft foretold and there is little danger to be apprehended from flying to another asylum either in the area or at base, then it may be best to evacuate. If there is a probability of enemy attack by air, then it is normally best to leave the aircraft in their dug-in bays under Bofors protection until nightfall when they can use the strip (provided that the enemy has not night in the meantime overrun it). Apart from the power of the light A/A artillery to protect the area of the strip and to disturb the rest of any enemy bivouacking near it, here is where the Light Machine-Gun pits can play a useful part in rendering the enemy cautious and driving him back. He has only just arrived and he will seek to fix and identify the Stronghold before attacking. Therefore his first probing attacks can easily be beaten off and a resolute defence of Bren pits added to artillery fire should permit the strip to be used for the necessary half hour or less required to clear the aircraft after dark. The small hours might well be chosen and an artillery bombardment begin the business to drown the noise of engines.

This manoeuvre would be necessary only if the attack were likely to prove prolonged and severe. It would then save a number of aircraft from probable destruction. On the other hand a panicky evacuation of aircraft on the first news of enemy approach would be inexcusable; all the more in that such warning will be received almost daily during warm periods. Thus the aircraft should proceed normally until the signal "enemy in sight" has been sounded on the trumpet. Thereafter they will act on the orders of the Stronghold Commander who will be guided by the considerations named.

Small enemy patrols call for no evacuation or interruption of work by anyone. The object will be to annihilate them and an attempt may well be made to lure them on.

To return to the floater company, the first task of the Company Commander on taking over is to relieve the Bren pit garrison round the airstrip. This will normally call for one section suitably reinforced with Brens borrowed from the Stronghold. After making the tour of the pits to make sure that all are provisioned and in good order and that the strip is in fit condition, (if not, immediate action is taken by the Stronghold Commander to make it fit) for use by aircraft, the floater company commander makes the tour outlined on the Sketch. Dummies are



visited to ensure that they have not been tampered with. Telephonic communications are tested. The area is closely scrutinised with a view to detecting any suspicious appearances. The neighbouring village, if within four miles of the Stronghold, is visited and the inhabitants contacted in a pleasant but informative manner. Important news is passed on the Stronghold by W/T as soon as it is received. For this purpose one mule carrying a 22 set will be taken. Good training will put the set in touch within fifteen minutes. Only important information will thus require an interruption of the march. The bulk can be sent at the mid-day halt for dinner, or the evening halt for supper.

By night the floater will sleep within one mile of the Stronghold away from mined or artillery concentration areas. The complete circuit will be made by daylight. Relief will take place at dawn at a time laid down from day to day by the Stronghold Commander. Needless to say the circuit will vary from day to day and will sometimes be made clockwise, sometimes anti-clockwise. A log will be kept of the route taken and handed in to the Stronghold Commander on return for his careful scrutiny and comment. Sometimes he will find that the circuit has been improperly curtailed owing to the laziness of the floater company. He will not tolerate this, and when he observes that a given company has twice sinned in this way he will allot it an unpleasant role in excess of its normal share. Similarly extra vigilant and intelligent work on the part of the company will be rewarded by a *bon bouche* and exemption from unpleasant duties. Use of tracks on the circuit will be avoided as far as possible and virgin forest traversed always along fresh lines.

When the enemy has intruded into the Stronghold demesne and approached to the walls of the Stronghold the floater's moment has come. The Company Commander has to consider how he can best inflict heavy casualties on the enemy and prevent him at the same time from serious digging-in. He will often conclude that he must first engage him light in order to deny him easy access to ground it is undesirable that he should occupy. Also it will be desired to obtain early and accurate information of his Bivouac Area and arrangements, since it is here that he can best be attacked and cut to pieces by night.

The enemy must bivouac on water or near it and this should make it easy using a little ingenuity to lead him towards a given area. The artillery troop should have already registered on this target and thus be in a position to support a night attack. In any case arrangements can easily be made for a programme shoot or shoot with observation during darkness since the whole area is registered, and the range probably short.

Owing to the impromptu nature of the enemy's defences it should be possible to rush his bivouac without serious opposition provided that its location has been ascertained with fair accuracy. In these circumstances the first attack should consist of an infantry charge without any preliminaries. Hand grenades and bayonets should be the weapons. The object should be completely to traverse the enemy bivouac from one side to the other. The charge may be preceded by throwing a couple of dozen bombs into the bivouac from discharger cups a few yards from the edge. Immediately after the explosions a charge should be made by the remainder from another angle with fixed bayonets. Parties should proceed steadily on compass bearing throughout the bivouac and out the far side where they will continue on the same bearing at least one mile before assembling to the sound of the trumpet. This sound



will also be the signal for the artillery Out Post to order the opening of fire by 25-pounders or Bofors. In any case such fire will be opened within twelve minutes of the charge on the bivouac and sooner if the observer thinks fit.

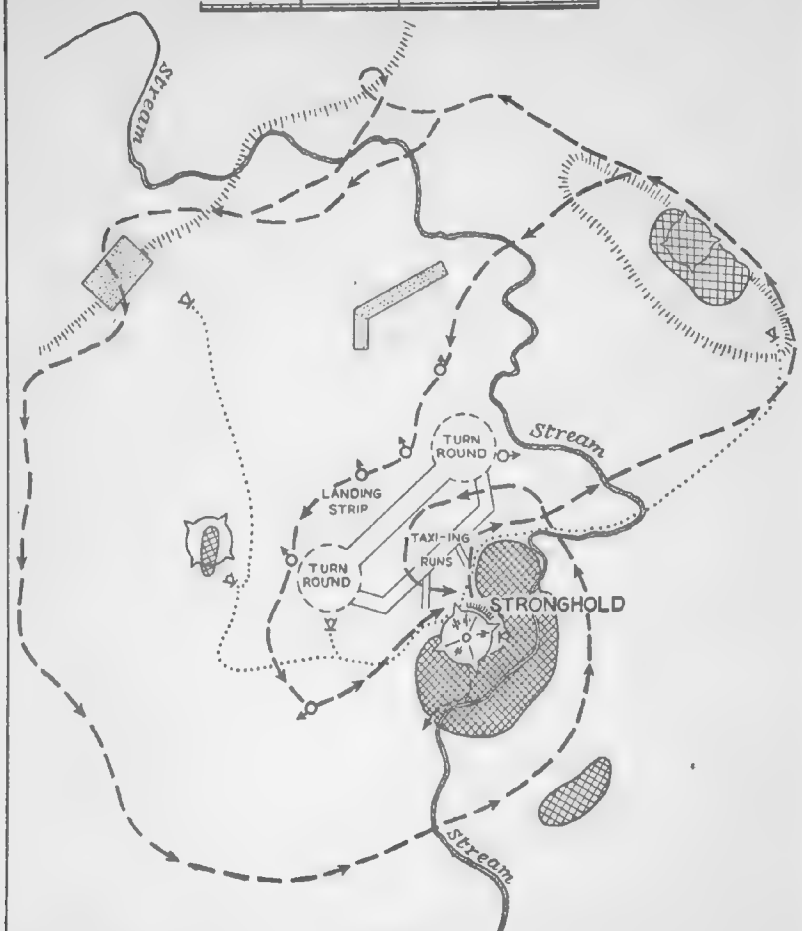
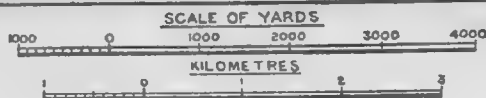
The artillery observer will correct the opening rounds on to the target.

An occasional burst of twelve rounds or so will be kept up as long as the bivouac appears to be still occupied. After reassembly and a meal the company will return to the scene and again attack, if the enemy is still in the bivouac.

The effect of such an attack on the enemy, even if he is in battalion strength or more will be completely to disrupt him before he can even begin to mature his plans. The following day will see him scattered and in flight. All that is required is, firstly, faith on the part of the Company Commander that such methods will succeed ; secondly, determination and courage in their application, thirdly, an accurate and painstaking artillery contingent, and lastly, a Stronghold Commander who never rests on achievement but continually tries out schemes and methods to improve the Stronghold defence.



# OPERATIONS OF SPECIAL FORCE ORGANISATION OF A STRONGHOLD LOCALITY



## KEY

AIRCRAFT SHELTER.....		LMG DUG IN.....	
DUMMY STRONGHOLD.....		ARTILLERY O.P.....	
BOOBY TRAPPED OR MINED AREA.....		TELEPHONE LINE.....	
AREAS REGISTERED BY ARTILLERY.....		EMERGENCY UNDERGROUND EXIT.....	
25 PDR.....		PATH OF FLOATER COMPANY.....	



# APPENDIX 9

## ORDER OF BATTLE, 3RD INDIAN DIVISION

1 March 1944

ADV HQ 3 IND Div Major-General O. C. Wingate, D.S.O.

					Colns
14 INF BDE					
Adv HQ	...	...	...	...	59
1 Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire	...	...	...	...	16
					61
7 Leicesters	...	...	...	...	47
					74
2 Black Watch	...	...	...	...	73
					42
2 York and Lanc	...	...	...	...	84
					65
16 INF BDE					
Adv HQ	...	...	...	...	99
2 Queens	...	...	...	...	21
					22
1 Leicesters	...	...	...	...	17
					71
					45
45 Recce Regt	...	...	...	...	54
					51
57/69 R.A.	...	...	...	...	69
77 IND INF BDE					
Adv HQ	...	...	...	...	25
					81
1 Kings	...	...	...	...	82
					20
1 Lancashire Fusiliers	...	...	...	...	50
					38
1 South Staffords	...	...	...	...	80
					36
3/6 Gurkha Rifles	...	...	...	...	63
UNDER COMMAND					
3/9 Gurkha Rifles	...	...	...	...	57
					93
"Dah Force"					
111 IND INF BDE					
Adv HQ	...	...	...	...	48
2 King's Own	...	...	...	...	41
					46
1 Cameronians	...	...	...	...	26
					90



				<i>Colns</i>	
3/4 Gurkha Rifles	...	...	...	30	
				40	
4/9 Gurkha Rifles	...	...	...	49	
				94	Morris Force
3 (WA) BDE					
Adv HQ	...	...	...	10	
6 Nigeria Regt	...	...	...	66	
				39	
7 Nigeria Regt	...	...	...	29	
				35	
12 Nigeria Regt	...	...	...	12	
				43	

NOTE: 23 Infantry Brigade also formed part of Special Force at this time. The brigade, however, never operated under command of the 3rd Indian Division and was transferred to the XXXIII Corps at the end of March 1944.



APPENDIX 10

CASUALTIES OF 3RD INDIAN DIVISION

1. *Casualties Suffered*

	Killed & Died of Wounds		Wounded		Missing	
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
14 Inf Bde ...	14	227	23	191	2	32
16 Inf Bde ...	13	85	14	164	5	74
77 Ind Inf Bde ...	46	346	84	1156	11	168
111 Ind Inf Bde ...	17	107	24	465	6	130
3 (WA) Bde ...	11	78	23	290	1	23
<b>TOTAL</b> ...	<b>101</b>	<b>843</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>2266</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>427</b>

*Total Casualties:*      294 Officers  
3536 ORs  


---

3830

2. *Casualties Inflicted on the Japanese*

			Killed	Wounded	Captured
14 Inf Bde ...	...	...	510	45	1
16 Inf Bde ...	...	...	379	328	1
77 Ind Inf Bde ...	...	...	2052	69	19
111 Ind Inf Bde ...	...	...	1084	121	2
3 (WA)* Bde ...	...	...	691	4	5
			<b>4716</b>	<b>567</b>	<b>28</b>

*Total Japanese Casualties:*      5311 all ranks



APPENDIX 11  
SPECIAL FORCE OPERATIONS  
AIRCRAFT SCORES

PLACE	Shot down	Destroyed on ground	Crash landed	Overdue	Shot down	Destroyed on ground	Probables	Damaged
BROADWAY	...	1 Spit	1 B25	1 DC3	9x	—	3	—
ABERDEEN	...	1 DC3	6 DC3	2 Hurri- bombers	9	—	4	18
WHITE CITY	...	—	—	—	6	—	7	11
MYITKYINA	...	—	—	—	4	—	2	—
BLACKPOOL	...	—	4 DC3	—	1	—	1	—
MISCELLANEOUS	...	4 DC3	6 DC3	4 DC3	—	—	—	—
No. 1 AIR COMMAN- DO OTHER THAN ABOVE	...	—	—	2 P51s 16 Lt ac 1 B25	8	78	3	25
TOTAL	...	6	17	26	37	78	20	54

x=6 by Spitfires.



## APPENDIX 12

### EXTRACT FROM

#### "REPORT ON OPERATIONS OF SPECIAL FORCE"

##### *Main Lessons*

(a) The detailed characteristics of Special Force must be clear to the Commander of the main forces under whom they are operating. Its high powered specialist role is inevitably at the expense of certain characteristics normal in other formations and this must be accepted.

(b) Glider landings should normally be preceded by a preliminary parachute operation, as the Force is not trained in air landing.

(c) Air support allotted to Special Force should be specifically so allotted, and should train and operate with that Force.

(d) A firm base (preferably per Brigade) is necessary to afford true mobility to columns. The firm base must be inaccessible to all forms of enemy movement except infantry on foot and guns on mules, in a riceless area, and must be provided with AA and field artillery and if possible fighter aircraft.

(e) The greatest efficiency is achieved when the Commander, General and A/Q staffs are together, which entails Headquarters being concentrated at Air Base. If by force of circumstances the Headquarters must be split then:—

(i) At least two A/Q officers must be with the Commander and General Staff.

(ii) The signals communications with the Commander and General Staff must be such that the former is in possession of all available incoming information at the time he issues executive orders.

(iii) If such signals set-up is not possible then only a senior Liaison Officer should be permanently forward at the Headquarters at which the Commander's presence is required, the Commander visiting periodically.

(iv) The signals set-up, though it can be moved in an emergency, is not mobile in the ordinary sense of the word and cannot function like an ordinary formation.

(f) Detachments of Brigades, e.g., DAHFORCE, MORRISFORCE and BLADET, operating at a distance on an independent mission should be placed under direct command of Force Commander and not under their own Brigade Commanders. The latter are too occupied with the handling of their Brigade as such to control such detachments adequately, and the efficiency of the latter suffers.

(g) Though trained primarily in penetration tactics all units of Special Force should be capable of a normal infantry role, if required, and within the limits set by the organisation and weapons of the Force, but require reinforcement by heavy support resources of artillery, RE, etc.

(h) The greatest use must be made of the flexibility given by air supply. Columns carried far too much to meet every eventuality. Loads both of the man and the mule should be reduced initially to immediately



foreseeable requirements to be supplemented later as required by dropping stores. This saves men and mules from unnecessary effort, cuts down the size of the tail, but does of course involve some waste of equipment dropped which cannot be carried.

(j) The first attack on INDAW violated the principle of 'maintenance of the object.' The objective given was the town itself, which consisted of a collection of bamboo houses, which was of NO value whatsoever to our forces. The object, however, was cutting the rail and road communications (which could have been cut anywhere in the area and NOT necessarily in the town itself), and the destruction of the various dumps located in the surrounding villages and jungle.

In general, L.R.P. Forces should NOT be expected to attack and capture towns such as MOGAUNG, which was forced on 77 Ind Inf Bde.

(k) The problem of adequate combined planning is still unsolved. An operation of this nature involves multiplicity of Headquarters and organisations spread over the ample terrain of INDIA and the forward areas.

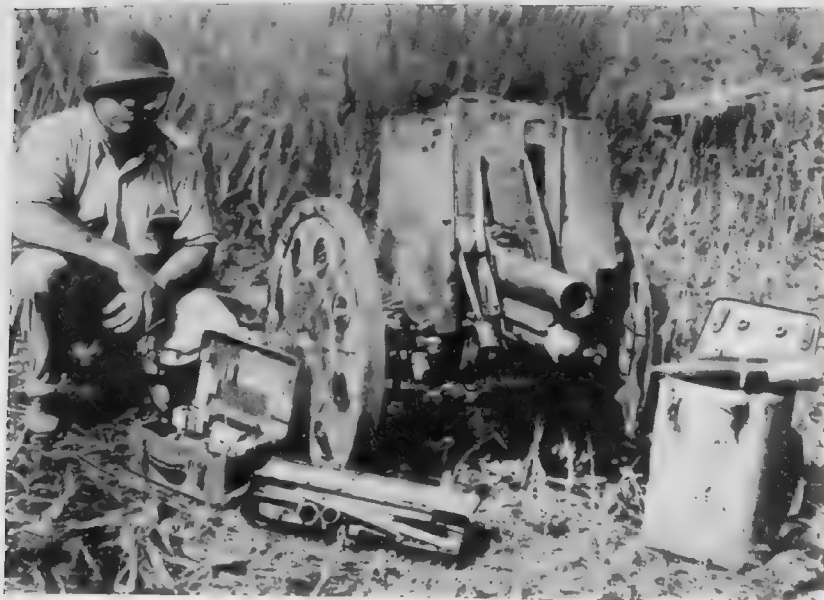
(l) At the outset of operations, when the plan envisaged holding the INDAW-KATHA area, it was announced to the KACHINS as far south as the 24th parallel that this time we intended to hold such ground as we captured, that is to say, that we intended to remain in North BURMA and therefore would be able to protect them. This was a mistake.



## APPENDIX 13

### SOME TYPES OF JAPANESE ARTILLERY

The following notes have been reproduced from war-time reports



70-mm. Battalion Gun

#### THE INFANTRY "BATTALION" GUN (70-mm. MORTAR GUN)

This is a 70-mm. mortar gun of "92" (1932) pattern. It is issued on a scale of two to each infantry battalion. The details are as follows:—

Pattern	...	...	...	"92" (1932)
Calibre	...	...	...	70-mm. (2.75")
Length of piece	...	...	...	16.1 cals
Wt. of shell	...	...	...	8.36 lbs.
Muzzle velocity	...	...	...	650 f/s.
Max Range	...	...	...	3000 yds.
Wt. in action	...	...	...	446 lbs.
Max elevation	...	...	...	51°
Max Traverse	...	...	...	40°

The weapon is not very efficient. It is very shaky on its mounting and is very finicky to work, too many adjustments having to be made when firing.

By a system of cranks on the wheels, the gun can be given three main elevations, followed by normal ranging adjustments; the shells have four different charges, and there are four sights to be used accordingly. Like the "Regimental" gun, it employs the normal dial sight in use in the artillery.

Considerable difficulty is experienced in getting the men proficient in handling this weapon in the short time available for training, and it is not viewed favourably by the Japanese.

Its crew is ten men and one NCO and, when manhandled, these ten men are employed as follows:—

Section Cmd carrying spare parts

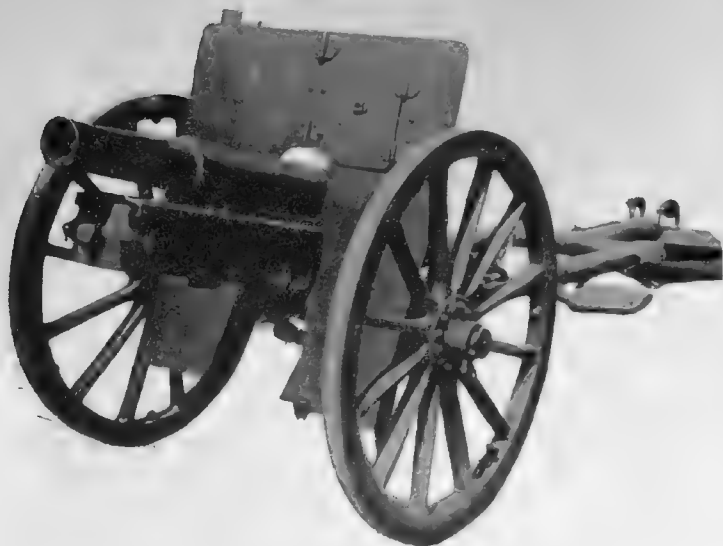
Nos. 1 and 2 dragging the gun

Nos. 3 and 4 pushing the gun

No. 5 carrying the sights and laying apparatus

Nos. 6 to 10 carrying the ammn.





75-mm. Regimental Gun

THE INFANTRY "REGIMENTAL" GUN MEIJI '41' (75-mm.  
MOUNTAIN GUN)

Details of the old type gun are:—

Pattern	...	1908
Type	...	Q.F. Shielded gun on two wheeled carriage
Calibre	...	75-mm. (2.95 ins.)
Length of barrel	...	3 ft. 3 ins.
Rifling	...	70 uniform twist
No. of grooves	...	28
Breech mechanism	...	Single motion, swinging; interrupted screw
Firing mechanism	...	By lanyard through trigger to striker in breech block
Carriage	...	Takes down into axle and cradle, carriage proper, trail piece with spade and shield
Trail	...	Forked
Weight in action	...	1,500 lbs.
Diameter of wheels	...	3 ft. 7 ins.
Sights	...	Telescope dial
Max elevation	...	25°
Max depression	...	8°
Traverse	...	3½° each way
Muzzle velocity	...	1250 F.S.
Max range	...	7,000 yards
Time for unpacking and assembling	...	3 mins.
Rate of fire	...	20 rounds per minute

The gun has a crew of one N.C.O. and 12 men.

This was originally a mountain gun, and was used as such till 1935. Being replaced then by a more modern mountain gun (Meiji '94' pattern), the old 75-mm. (pattern 41) gun was handed over to the infantry as 'Regimental' Gun.





75-mm. Mountain Gun, Type "94"

## 75-mm. MOUNTAIN GUN TYPE "94" (1934)

Calibre	...	...	75-mm.
Max Range (Standard)	...	...	7980 yds.
(Long Pointed)	...	...	9080 yds.
Muzzle Velocity	...	...	1130 f/s.
Elevation	...	...	-10° to +43°
Traverse	...	...	40°
Wt. of Shell	...	...	14.24 lbs.
Trail type	...	...	Split
Transport	...	...	6 Horses & 1 Limber Horse
Max Rate of Fire	...	...	10-12 r.p.m.
Max marching speed	...	...	6 m.p.h.
Total Weight	...	...	10.7 cwt.
Length of gun limbered	...	...	13.1 ft.
Lands	...	...	28





75-mm. Field Gun Type "90"

## 75-mm. FIELD GUN TYPE "90"

The gun is of modern design and has a horizontal sliding breech, hydropneumatic recoil mechanism and split trail. It is easily recognised by its long barrel and slotted muzzle brake. The carriage may be equipped with wooden wheels, when horse-drawn, or with pneumatic tyres for motor transport.

The Type "90" is perhaps the most accurate and efficient field piece at present used by the Japanese. A more recent version of this 75-mm gun, the Type "95" has been encountered frequently. However, the latter model is of less rugged construction and is inferior in performance. Markings on the guns show they were manufactured in 1942.

## CHARACTERISTICS

Weight	...	...	3,080 lbs.
Height	...	...	5 ft. 6 ins.
Length (firing position)	...	...	17 ft. 3 ins.
Width	...	...	5 ft. 10 ins.
Muzzle velocity	...	...	2,230 fps.
Maximum range (horizontal)	...	...	15,000 yds.
Rate of fire	...	...	10-12 rds/min.
Traverse	...	...	25°
Elevation	...	...	43°
Depression	...	...	8°
Length of recoil	...	...	41.3 ins.
Sight	...	...	Panoramic
Ammunition	...	...	HE, APHE, Shrapnel Incendiary, Smoke, HE pointed
Weight of projectile	...	...	13.95 lbs.





37-mm. Anti-Tank Gun

### THE 37-mm. ANTI-TANK GUN

The standard anti-tank gun of the Japanese army is the 1935 model 37-mm. anti-tank gun which, it is believed, has been issued down to infantry battalions.

The gun has a maximum range of 5,000 metres (5,900 yds.) and weighs 370 kg. (7.25 cwt.).

The gun is very accurate and easy to fire. The maximum rate of fire is twenty five rounds a minute. The gun is drawn by one horse. When manhandled, its crew of ten are distributed as follows:—

Numbers 1 to 3 dragging the gun.

Number 4 carrying the hammer for driving in the base of the trail.

Number 5 spare parts, and sights.

Number 6 to 10 ammunition.

The gun is a split trail weapon, and its wheels swivel to an angle of  $45^\circ$  when in action, allowing a traverse of  $60^\circ$  for the barrel. Two men are employed in firing the gun. Number 5 being responsible for keeping the sights on the target and firing. The gun is semi automatic in that it ejects the shell case at the end of its 45 cm. recoil and the breech closes automatically as the next shell is inserted.







# Bibliography

This volume is based primarily on official records possessed by the C.I.S. Historical Section. Of these the most important are the war diaries of the various units which took part in the campaign for the reconquest of Burma. The Historical Section has an almost complete set of these diaries, particularly of the Indian forces.

In addition, there are a number of 'appreciations' written during the course of the war by military officers and men at the top. The contents of these appreciations must have formed the basis for strategy in Burma and a study of these is therefore essential.

The 'despatches' written by the different commanders soon after the completion of operations form another useful source for an understanding not only of higher policy but also of the administrative and logistical difficulties inherent in the conduct of a modern military campaign. It is not possible to give a complete list of all the diaries, appreciations and despatches consulted in the writing of this narrative but some of these are listed below.

Since ample documentary sources of a primary nature were available, much use has not been made of the secondary published sources or accounts, except perhaps for describing Allied strategy and diplomacy at the highest level. However, a list of these secondary sources which have been consulted is also given below.

## WAR DIARIES

War Diaries of all units that took part in the campaign for the reconquest of Burma, and particularly of the following:—

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